

Harry Potter and the Power of Time

Chapter 1 – Welcome Home, Freak!

Harry Potter had seen much in his short life, and that's saying a lot taking into consideration that for the first eleven years of his life, he'd been locked into a small cupboard of his relatives' home. He hated to admit that he was related to them, but Harry's Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and his robust whale of a cousin Dudley had forced a very sheltered life on him at an extremely early age. Besides going to primary school (where he was bullied), eating his meager meals (where he was starved), and attending to the never ending amount of chores he was given (where he was forced into slave labor), Harry knew very little of the existence outside of his cupboard under the stairs, at the very normal, ordinary home of number four Privet Drive. That is until he found out he was a wizard, and a thumpin' good one at that.

On the day of his eleventh birthday, not that anyone besides him knew or cared, Harry was rescued from his sheltered life by a very large man named Hagrid. He was told he belonged to a world full of wondrous things; magical creatures, spells and curses, invisible castles and flying broomsticks. Of course he was also told of the downside to the wizarding world; the dark wizards and questionable people that craved power and influence. And of course of the very evil Lord Voldemort, whose name was so feared, it wasn't even mentioned in the entire magical community. It was this same Voldemort, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, who had killed Harry's parents all those years ago and attempted to kill him as well. But something unexpected happened, something no one to this day can fully explain.

Harry Potter survived a killing curse from the most powerful dark wizard in over a century, and disembodied Voldemort himself. That's why Harry Potter is known among his kind as "The Boy Who Lived," because he survived where so many others did not, with only a small lightning bolt shaped scar above his right eye to show for it.

Five years have passed since Harry discovered who he really was, and not one of the years had passed without at least one attempt on

his life by Voldemort or one of his followers. But this past year was different. After the events of last summer, when Harry witnessed first hand and unwillingly participated in the rebirth of the man who murdered his parents, Harry's life took a drastic turn for the worse. Forced into exile by Albus Dumbledore; Hogwarts' Headmaster (and someone who Harry had implicitly trusted until just last week); Harry had spent the previous summer holidays with his spiteful relatives, not even being allowed to freely contact his friends about news in the wizarding world. He was kept in the dark, against his will, and when Harry returned to Hogwarts for his fifth year last September, he was no longer the same person he once was.

In was this past year that Harry now looked back on, as he rode in silence back to Privet Drive. His relatives had just picked him up from King's Cross Station about an hour ago, at the end of a very hard year for Harry. Unknown to him at the time, Voldemort had spent the entire year subtly influencing Harry, taking advantage of him through the mental link caused by his curse scar. Previously the scar only hurt him in times when Voldemort was close by, or feeling emotions of great rage and anger. Harry had not known that Voldemort could enter his mind. Even when he was ordered to study Occlumency under the tuition (if you want to call it that) of Professor Snape, Harry was never informed why.

So the year had ended horribly with another death, just like the previous year. Cedric Diggory had not deserved to die; he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. And if Harry had felt guilty about that death, it was nowhere near the amount of pain he felt about his dead godfather, Sirius Black.

On one of the last days of term, just as Harry finished sitting for his OWLs (Ordinary Wizard Levels), Voldemort finally broke through to Harry's mind, with the vision of Sirius being tortured for information in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic. Because of his previous visions, which had always proved correct, and because of the love he had for his godfather, one of the last of his diminishing parental figures, Harry went to save Sirius. Sure he tried to get help, but Hogwarts at that time was not a friendly place to be. Dumbledore had been removed from power, head of Gryffindor house Professor McGonagall was at St. Mungo's recovering from serious injuries, and the wicked

Professor Umbridge, placed at Hogwarts at the Minister's request, kept a close eye on Harry and his friends with the help of some of the slimier students.

So Harry, with his two best friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, and three of his other friends Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and Ron's younger sister Ginny, flew to London on the back of winged horses; thestrals; to go and save Sirius. Sneaking into the Ministry was easier than it should have been, as was breaking into the Department of Mysteries (DoM), one of the most secret departments in the Ministry of Magic. Following Harry's directions, guided by the visions he'd had all year long, the group quickly arrived at the place where Sirius was being held. But Sirius was not there, it was a trap.

Later Harry learned that the visions were placed in his head by Voldemort to lure him there, but at that instant Harry couldn't care, because he was fighting for his life. The six students, only fourteen and fifteen years old, were surrounded by eleven Death Eaters; Voldemort's very inner circle in fact. To say that the fight that ensued was a surprise to the young group would be an understatement, but the six fighters held up well under the onslaught of the Death Eaters.

The attack lasted longer than any of them expected, and took both the Death Eaters and the students into numerous rooms within the DoM. The six were separated, all of them hurt, some of them incapacitated, but thankfully none of them died. Eventually they were rescued by the Order of the Phoenix, an underground group formed to fight Voldemort and his forces. A larger battle began, even Dumbledore himself showed up to personally fight Voldemort, but it all ended quickly. Many of the Order were injured, and unfortunately, one died.

Sirius....Harry saw him come to his rescue, with a strange look of joy on his face as he battled his own cousin to protect Harry and his friends. He'd been cooped up in Grimmauld Place for almost a full year at the order of Dumbledore, and even if Sirius had to fight, you could see his relief just to escape the home which held so many horrible memories for him. His death came as a surprise, and Harry guessed little pain as well. While teasing his cousin Bellatrix

Lestrange, Voldemort's most faithful servant, he caught a spell right to the chest. You could tell it didn't hurt much by the surprised look on Sirius's face. That look changed to horror though as he began to fall back by the force of the spell, towards a dark curtain blacker than night....the veil.

Not much is known about the veil, and so it makes perfectly good sense for it to be located in the Department of Mysteries, but one thing that's known for sure is that anything that passes beyond the veil never comes back. Harry didn't want to believe it, he could almost hear Sirius's voice calling for Harry to save him, but thankfully Remus Lupin grabbed him and held him back. It took Harry awhile to accept that Sirius was dead, but in the end he did, and he cried.

He cried, and he attacked. Harry lashed out at anyone who came near him. He was tired, tired of losing people close to him. At first he blamed himself for Sirius's death, just as he did with Cedric. But he got over that real quick. Harry had just spent the past year feeling sorry for himself, and he knew he never wanted Sirius to be harmed. No, there were better people to blame for what happened than himself. Kreacher....the damn house elf had lied to him about Sirius being captured, Snape....if the evil bastard could only have put aside his feelings for Harry's father he never would have quit learning Occlumency, and Dumbledore....that hurt Harry most of all.

Previously, Harry had always looked up to Dumbledore, almost like a kind, if somewhat odd, grandfather type. But this year he had abandoned Harry. He refused to let his friends send him news during the past summer. He refused to tell him why he should be taking extra lessons with Snape of all people. He refused to even see Harry during the school year, not even trying to explain his actions that hurt Harry so. And then of course there was the prophecy, that damn prophecy.

As if Harry wasn't hurting enough with the recent loss of Sirius, and the betrayed feelings from the rest of the Order, Dumbledore had the nerve to tell him what the whole year had been about. The whole reason Voldemort had lured Harry to the Ministry in the first place was to hear a prophecy made about the two of them, that predicted the dark lord's demise. It started out as your standard prophecy,

Harry supposed. Blah blah blah....AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES, blah blah blah....MARKED AS AN EQUAL, blah blah blah....POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT. Then of course came the icing on the cake. The last part that Voldemort didn't know about. The part that almost broke Harry as he heard it right there in Dumbledore's office. EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER, FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES. It took Harry a moment to translate that into English, but when he did, Harry understood it very well. Kill or be killed.

Harry had always wanted to know why Voldemort had always wanted him dead, why he tried so hard, so many times to come after Harry. It's not like Harry tried to get in his way. He just wanted to be left alone, to lead as normal as a life as possible. Now Harry understood though. It was all up to him. He had to stop Voldemort in the end, and he was the only one who could.

So this is what Harry Potter thought about while driving home with his relatives. Dudley; sitting next to him taking up both the middle and the left side of the back seat; was probably thinking about girls. Girls, or food, or sports, or about any number of things a normal fifteen year old should. And here he was, Harry Potter, thinking that one day his title of "Boy Who Lived" will be changed. He'll soon become "Boy Who Died," or "Boy Who Killed."

But Harry didn't fight it anymore, he had accepted it. It was his destiny. And as much as he normally didn't believe in things like that, Harry didn't care; it had nothing to do with the prophecy. Harry had realized that nobody was doing anything to stop Voldemort. Sure people said there were. The Ministry finally admitted his return; but really. Harry had little faith in Minister Fudge; he would only try to protect himself and his position as Minister. Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix also plotted against Voldemort, but what they did wasn't enough either. Harry of course had certain amounts of respect, and even love for certain members of the Order, but their methods weren't productive enough. They never went after Voldemort or his Death Eaters, instead they sat back and collected information. What good is it to know how strong the enemy's forces are, if you do nothing but watch them grow stronger?

After his talk in Dumbledore's office, Harry knew what their plans would be. The Order would not fight; they'd simply keep the enemy at bay, hoping that one day Voldemort would slip up and make a mistake which they could take advantage of. They'd also protect Harry the best they could, even if they had to lock him in a Gringott's vault to do it. Harry didn't claim to be an expert, but a few years of seeing into his mind had taught Harry enough to know that Tom Riddle was a very smart wizard. Voldemort wouldn't be making any large scale mistakes so soon after his fourteen year absence. He was sure Ginny Weasley would agree, after spending the better part of a year being possessed by him. And Harry'd be damned if he sat back for the next few years, being mollycoddled by those around him, while hundreds of innocent people died.

The wizarding world needed someone to take a stand against Voldemort, and not just in the press or based on ideals. They needed a champion to strike out at his forces, to fight, to show the Death Eaters that their crimes wouldn't go unpunished. And Harry decided he would be that person. Prophecy or not, it didn't matter to Harry, he was tired of innocent people being harmed while nobody did anything about it. Who better to stand up to Voldemort than Harry? Others had families to look after, had responsibilities to attend to, had lives to lead. Harry had already lost so many people in his life. With the exceptions of Hermione, Ron and the other Weasleys, and a few others, Harry really had no other reason to live. A weak person might have given up already. Thank Merlin, Harry wasn't one of those. He was a true Gryffindor, and could see the light at the end of the tunnel. A world without Voldemort in it would be a grand place to live, and Harry decided with all his being that he'd help to achieve that goal.

And as he looked down into his lap, Harry closed his hands over the small item that would help him with this task. He wasn't sure entirely yet how, but he knew it could. A small item that he knew from experience could be a great advantage. A small item that had changed the course of history. A small item, that as powerful and rare as it was supposed to be, Harry oddly enough found caught in the folds of his robes the night he came back from the Department of Mysteries. A small item, that Harry had been forming plans around for the past few days since he'd discovered it.

It was nothing too impressive looking, and Harry had even seen one before, once hanging from Hermione's neck on a chain. Of course this was an advanced model, far more capable than the other one Harry had encountered two years earlier. Harry supposed it had fallen into his robes in that glittery room within the DoM, when Harry and his friends were attacked and on the run. He remembered the Death Eater's head falling into the bell jar, and morphing into the head of a baby, and how curses were being flung around left and right. Yes, Harry decided, that's when the small time tuner must have fallen into his robes from one of the shelves.

As his Uncle Vernon pulled into the driveway at number four Privet Drive, Harry wrapped the small time tuner in an old sock he never wore, and placed it carefully back into his pocket. Tomorrow he would start the rest of his life. No longer would he be a bystander, tomorrow he would become a fighter, and he would need a few new things. His uncle and aunt were warned not to abuse him by members of the Order just a few hours ago, so they would go easy on Harry at least for a few days, and that would be plenty of time. So Harry got out of the car, walked to the back of it to open the boot, and dragged out his battered school trunk and owl's cage. Hedwig had flown ahead of them so she wouldn't be locked in the small trunk for the two hour car ride. His Aunt Petunia and Dudley hurried inside the house quickly (or as quickly as Dudley could waddle), and Harry's uncle waited impatiently for Harry to close the boot of the car so he could lock it up. Harry began to drag his possessions behind him, and was roughly pushed aside as his uncle flew by him on his way inside.

Harry watched as his uncle opened the door, and turned around. For an instant, Harry almost believed that his uncle was going to hold the door open for him and his heavy luggage. Harry should have known better. With a look of distaste and immense loathing on his face, his uncle turned to him and spat out, "Welcome home, freak!" before slamming the door in Harry's face.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to,

besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 2 – Escape on the Knight Bus

Harry woke the next morning hours before the sun would be up. Although it was rather early, Harry felt refreshed and alert after the best night's sleep since he saw Sirius die. "Today," Harry thought, "is the day it all begins." After climbing out of bed and dressing in the best clothes he had (meaning the ones that fit him the best), Harry packed up one of Dudley's old backpacks, and quietly left his room to go clean up. Luckily Hedwig was still out hunting, or she would probably have hooted an inquiry and woken up the household.

Daring not to shower for fear of waking his aunt and uncle, Harry washed his face and neck at the kitchen sink. Opening the refrigerator door only halfway; because it creaked if opened fully; Harry grabbed a carton of juice and quickly ate some cold cereal. Five minutes later, with the dirty dishes in the sink, Harry was out the back door.

The second he set foot in the yard, Harry ripped open the bag he packed and took out his father's invisibility cloak. He had no delusions about members of the Order watching over his home. And his fears were quickly verified when he crept around to the front of the house and heard a gruff voice coming from the bushes across the street. Stepping carefully so as not to make a sound, Harry leaned over a hedge of blue hydrangea to find none other than Mundungus Fletcher grumbling something about questionable potions ingredients.

'Boy,' thought Harry, 'Dung is sure going to get it when Dumbledore discovers I've disappeared on his watch again.' Harry couldn't help but inwardly laugh as he quietly started down the street. He almost made it away scott-free too, if Hedwig hadn't chosen that moment to reappear from her nightly hunting. She landed in a tree just overhead, and was about to hoot to Harry, when he parted the invisibility cloak just enough to pop his head out.

"Shhh!" Harry whispered. "Quiet girl! Follow me, but be quiet." Harry knew he was risking discovery from Dung, but luckily the seedy old man was none the wiser, still mumbling on about exchange rates and such nonsense. Harry practically ran to the end of the block, and

turned a corner to get out of sight before taking down the hood of his cloak and yelling at his owl.

"Hedwig! You almost got me caught! What were you doing?" Harry really didn't mean to sound so angry with his winged friend, but it would have been very bad for the Order to catch onto his plans, at least this soon into his vacation.

Naturally, Hedwig couldn't word a response to answer Harry's questions, but she did hoot indignantly as if to say, "What was I doing? What are you doing, sneaking out so early in the morning?"

Harry quickly apologized to Hedwig, saying he didn't mean to snap. Although he never discussed it with many people, Harry was actually very close to his pet owl. Besides Hagrid, she was the first friend he'd ever had. And during each summer between school sessions, she was the only one to keep him company at the Dursleys'. Letters from Ron and Hermione were great and all, but after a whole day of being berated by his relatives, having Hedwig in the room with him to pet and stroke helped calm him down.

Harry knew that Hedwig was only looking out for him, and knew he wasn't supposed to leave Privet Drive alone, but he just had to. He tried walking further away, but she just followed. Harry pleaded with her to return back home, but she wouldn't have any of it.

"Fine girl," Harry exclaimed, "but if we get caught, no owl treats for the rest of the summer! But please, I'm trying not to be noticed, so keep it down." Hedwig, who loved her owl treats, apparently had no problem with the deal, and silently followed along, flying high in the tree tops.

About five blocks from Privet Drive, Harry reached his destination. An all night convenience store which Harry had never been inside, stood before him near the main highway. Putting his invisibility cloak back inside his backpack, Harry entered the store and began to quickly look for his needed supplies. The plan was to go to Diagon Alley today, but Harry couldn't go as he was. Being one of the most recognizable faces in the wizarding world seemed to only have its

down sides in Harry's opinion. He needed a disguise, and not being allowed to use magic, at least yet, he needed a muggle disguise.

"Excuse me sir?" Harry asked the tall man sitting behind the front counter, "I'm playing a joke on my younger brother later today and need help disguising myself. I was wondering if you might be able to help me?" Harry had long ago figured out how to ask the question. Since the man had no idea who he was, and was not aware of the special circumstances surrounding his activities, Harry thought the best lie would be the closest thing he could tell to the truth.

"Sure kid, I'll help if I can, but we don't have much here. You might be better off in a department or costume store. What do you think you need?" The man replied.

"Well, I'm not sure exactly." Harry had expected this answer. "I don't have much money, but it's my brother's birthday and I wanted to play a prank on him. I was thinking about a hat or a wig, or something else to hide my face. See this scar on my forehead?" Harry actually enjoyed showing off his scar to the man. "It's pretty recognizable, and I need to hide it. Any suggestions?"

"Hmmm, well let me think a sec." Harry couldn't believe the luck he was having so far. The man seemed to buy this whole act. "We don't have any wigs or anything like that, but there's a small selection of hats back in the rear corner. You could wear a ball cap backwards and pull the front down far enough to cover up your forehead. Or, let's see....we got some cheap ski caps also. Not really the time of year for it, but it seems to be the fashion with young kids these days."

Harry thanked the man, and walked back to the section of hats that was pointed out. After he tried on a few in front of a mirror, Harry picked a simple black ski cap. It would cover up not only his scar, but he could put it over his ears to totally hide his recognizable black hair as well. Last night he had thought about using hair dye, but Harry hopefully only needed to be disguised this way just once, and dye just seemed a little overkill.

Walking up to the counter again with his purchase, Harry saw he had enough muggle money to buy a cheap pair of dark sunglasses as

well. It would leave him nearly broke in the muggle world, but he could change some money once he got to Gringotts.

“Here you go sir.” Harry placed the items on the counter. “Thanks for the tips. I only have to spy on my brother from a distance, and I think these will work.” Harry gave the man his last twenty pound note, and only got back a few coins, but he didn’t really need them. Exiting the store, Harry slipped on his purchases, put on a plain black robe and cloak from his bag, and continued to walk down the street.

The sun had just broken over the horizon when Harry reached a deserted alleyway, so the sunglasses weren’t too suspicious. He quickly raised the hood of his cloak over his head, and raised his wand which he slipped out from his pant’s pocket.

BANG!!!

Just a second later a large purple bus popped into existence, knocking over a trash can or two. Even though Harry expected the sound (as he’d done this before), it still startled him into jumping an inch or two off the ground.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus. I’m Stan Shunpike, your conductor this morning, and this here’s Ernie, the driver. He don’t say much, so don’t pay no attention to him.” Harry was surprised to come across Stan; the same pimple faced young man he’d seen three years ago on the same bus. Harry didn’t know why, but he figured Stan would have a different job by now, as conducting the stomach-churning rides of the Knight Bus couldn’t be the most glamorous job in the world. Still, having been through this before, Harry knew what to say. And thankfully, he remembered Stan wasn’t the brightest person in the land either.

“Hello, one to Diagon Alley please,” Harry said. As he spoke, Harry also was comforted by the fact that Stan didn’t recognize him as Harry Potter last time he rode the bus either. Just so Stan didn’t ask or become suspicious, Harry quickly added on an introduction. “Dean Thomas’s the name, please to meet you Stan.” Harry didn’t think Dean would mind Harry borrowing his name. Coming from a muggle background, Harry doubted he would ride the bus anytime soon. And

he couldn't very well introduce himself as Neville again. That might be remembered.

"Nice to meet you Dean. Fare to Diagon Alley is two galleons and eleven sickles. An extra galleon if you plan on bringing that owl there with you, and another five sickles for hot chocolate," Stan stated.

Forgetting about the hot chocolate, Harry turned around to see Hedwig on a nearby milk crate. He'd almost forgotten the bird was with him she was so quiet. Harry turned back around to Stan and agreed to the fare. "Here you go." Harry replied as he counted out four galleons from a money bag. "Just out of curiosity, why so much? Last time I rode the Knight Bus, the fare wasn't nearly so high."

Stan looked closely at him for the first time. Harry thought he'd been recognized, but than Stan calmed him by replying. "Ain't you been reading the papers, Dean? With You-Know-Who back and everything, prices all over are going up. People are scared, but that's just because news's only a few days old. Minister Fudge says he's got everything under control and not to worry. But the bosses want to put people's minds at ease. Me and Ern here, we got these panic buttons to push if something screwy happens. Cost a shiny sickle they did, but it alerts aurors, and they come running like mad if we need 'em. That's where all the extra money goes."

"Oh, that makes sense. I just got back from school, and don't see the paper much there." Harry didn't think telling the truth could hurt. "I never thought about how the public would react. But Dumbledore told us over a year ago that Vold....You-Know-Who was back, so it's not so much of a shock to us students." Harry thanked Merlin he didn't slip up and state Voldemort's name. That would have definitely aroused suspicions, even from Stan and Ernie. Harry also didn't think it prudent to add his opinions on Fudge's statement about safety, and kept his comments to himself.

"Yeah," Stan said, "heard about them rumors Dumbledore and Harry Potter were saying. Didn't believe it till now. Hey, do you know him? Harry Potter I mean. He'd probably be about your age."

Harry got really uncomfortable, but quickly replied, "I know of him, spoken to him a few times, but he tends to keep to himself. I reckon it's because all the rumors spread about him."

"Suppose you're right." Stan seemed to think about Harry's answer. "Anyways, third bed from the back on the right is yours. You're the only passenger right now, so we'll be there soon. Let's go Ern!"

Harry barely managed to grab a hold of a seat before the bus closed its door and jumped into motion. Struggling to get back to the bed where Hedwig already rested, Harry walked the distance carefully as not to fall over. The ride was quiet in the early morning hours without anyone else to talk to, and Harry silently chuckled to himself when he thought about using Neville's, and now Dean's identity on the bus. Next time it'll be Seamus Finnegan, Harry thought with a laugh.

The ride to Diagon Alley took just a few minutes as the Knight Bus drove through incredibly small gaps between other vehicles. They arrived without incident, and Harry quickly disembarked with a quick thanks to the driver and conductor. As the bus popped away in whatever weird form of apparition it used, Harry looked at the small pub entrance in front of him, virtually unseen by the public's eyes. Only witches and wizards knew it was there, and Harry recalled the first time he stepped through those doors with Hagrid all those years ago. With a deep breath, making sure his sunglasses were securely perched on his nose (his regular glasses were in a pocket), and his hat was pulled tight over his head, Harry opened the door to the Leaky Cauldron and walked inside.

AUTHOR NOTES:

Thanks so far to those that have read. It case you haven't figured out, I'm not even attempting to put forth an effort to sound properly British, as I have better things to do with my time. I know Stan's supposed to have a horrible accent, as will other people in the future of this story, but I have little experience is trying to write accents. If people like the story and review, maybe I'll throw in a "bloody" or two.

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I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

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Chapter 3 – Within the Bowels of Gringotts

Stepping into the Leaky Cauldron so early in the morning, it was virtually empty. Harry could see Tom standing behind the bar polishing a few goblets with a dishtowel, and just a handful of patrons sitting around two back tables. Harry guessed it was still early, but didn't know the exact time because he still hadn't replaced his watch from after the second task in the Tri-Wizard tournament. Purchasing a new watch was only one item on his very long list for the day. But first stop, Gringotts.

Hurrying across the tavern so as not to be seen, with Hedwig on his shoulder, Harry entered the back alleyway and tapped the few bricks that allowed entrance into Diagon Alley. "Three down, two across," Harry muttered to himself as he remembered the correct combination. He hadn't been to Diagon Alley since the summer before his third year, and it was a wonder he could still remember. The archway opened up, and Harry almost ran through, so eager to begin the day's purchases. The tall white columns of Gringotts loomed in the distance, and Harry quickly made his way through both sets of massive front doors. Harry recalled the fright he felt at passing the goblin guards on that first trip with Hagrid.

Approaching a teller's desk, Harry stood on line waiting his turn. To make sure he wasn't seen, he kept his hood up, and his head down. Finally it was his turn, and Harry approached the counter. "I'd like access to my vault please," Harry said as he slid his key across the desk. "I also would like to inquire about exchanging some funds into muggle money. That's new to me, so I have a few questions."

The goblin sitting high above Harry gave his key an intense look, but didn't ask for an ID confirmation. Harry wondered if the goblin knew he was trying to hide his identity. But then again, with all the dealing they must do with dark wizards and such, Harry guessed that as long as they got paid, goblins must not really care. Finally he spoke after almost a minute of examining Harry's vault key. "Please step to the right and tell the goblin at the service cart you wish to visit your vault sir. He'll escort you there. As to your other request, you can inquire about a transfer of funds at the Muggle Exchange Information Desk

on your return. There are a few different options, so listen well. Good day, sir."

Harry nodded a thanks, took back his vault key, and exited the line to the right, walking towards the goblin already waiting in a mine cart. Harry climbed over the side, and was glad Hedwig had decided to wait outside as the mine cart began to speed away.

"Vault 1295 please!" Harry yelled to the driver over the noise of the cart.

"Yes Mr. Potter, we'll be there shortly," replied the goblin.

Harry wondered how the goblin knew his name, and took a closer look at him. Although Harry was behind him, and faced the goblin's back, Harry soon recognized the tiny form of Griphook, the same goblin who escorted him to his vault all those years ago. Harry only thought it'd be polite, so he said, "Thank you Griphook. It's good to see you again."

His response caused Griphook to turn around and look at Harry queerly, but he said nothing. A few minutes later, after a many dips and twists, the mine cart came to a stop, and Griphook quickly climbed out followed by Harry.

"Lantern please," Griphook ordered and asked Harry, and Harry bent into the cart to lift the light, not surprised by the request in the slightest. He handed it to Griphook, and watched the little man scurry to the vault's huge doors. The next request came as no shock to Harry either. "Key please." Harry handed Griphook his vault key and stepped back, watching as the doors opened wide. Griphook handed Harry back his key and stood by the vault doors, waiting for Harry to conduct his business.

Harry stepped into his vault, still amazed at the large piles of golden galleons, silver sickles, and bronze knuts that heaped high off the ground. Harry couldn't even tell that he'd been taking money out of his vault for the past five years. While he'd never spent an extreme amount of money in the past, he still spent a fair amount over the

years on Christmas presents, visits to Hogsmeade, and his yearly school supplies.

"Griphook," Harry asked, "is there a way you can tell me the current amount of money I have?"

"Yes sir," he replied. "Begging your pardon sir, but how do you know me?"

Harry was confused by the question, but answered it anyways. "Well, you may not remember, but you once showed me to my vault before, a few years ago. Honestly, I was quite surprised to see you again. I'm sure there must be hundreds of goblins working at Gringotts, and I've seen you twice now. Why do you ask?"

Griphook was careful in his reply, and took a moment to answer. "I do remember your previous visit, it's just odd for a wizard, and one so young at that, to remember a goblin's name. To most a goblin is simply a goblin. I can't even remember the last time I was addressed by name."

"Well," Harry declared, "I'm not like most wizards I've found out. In the few years I've been around, I've had friendly run ins with a dragon, a hippogriff, a werewolf, two giants, a few house elves, and a handful of centaurs. I guess it's from my muggle uprising, but I find most wizard attitudes quite discriminating towards other magical beings. It's one of the things I find most unpleasant about the wizarding world. But with an idiot as Minister, what can I expect?" Harry realized he was beginning to ramble, and stopped there.

"Very well, sir. As to your inquiry about your total funds, there should be an enchanted parchment towards the back somewhere that lists this vault's total assets. It magically updates itself with each deposit and withdrawal you make. If you wish, you may take it with you, as it's just a copy of the original. For a complete list of your other assets, you'll have to see a bank manager." Griphook was most helpful in his reply.

Harry began to climb over a mountain of knuts even before Griphook finished his answer. In the back left corner of the room, indeed there

was a small podium with a parchment on the top. But before Harry reached it, Griphook's final statement sent him tumbling. "Other assets!" Harry yelled behind him. "What do you mean other assets?"

Griphook looked very uncomfortable, but answered nonetheless. "It's not normally my place to say sir, but I believe you have access to another larger vault on one of the lower, high security levels. This vault simply houses the trust fund that has been set up for you. The other vault, if I were to make a guess, is the Potter family vault. Most pureblood families have them."

Harry was shocked beyond belief. He always knew that he was wealthy, and that his father had come from a pureblood line, but he'd always assumed that this was his only vault. He couldn't even imagine what might be in a larger, high security vault. At least this would make his next decision a little easier, especially if he didn't have to rely on his trust fund for the rest of his life. Harry regained his composure and climbed the rest of the way to the pedestal in the rear. The parchment atop was a simple enough document. It had his full name on the top; Harry James Potter; and a total sum of funds on the bottom lines. Between the two was a record of the last fifteen withdrawals he, or Mrs. Weasley on his behalf, had made. Over the past five years, Harry quickly added, he had withdrawn a total amount of four hundred seventeen galleons, three sickles, and twenty three knuts.

Looking back down at the bottom line again, it was no wonder that Harry couldn't see a difference in the piles of money from year to year. According to the parchment, which Griphook assured Harry was accurate; Harry had access to a fortune. More precisely, about 2,792,461 galleons! "Whoa," Harry thought, "and this is just my trust fund? What the hell's in the other vault?"

It took him a few moments to remember the reason he was here in the first place, but after a spell, Harry tucked the enchanted parchment into a robe pocket, and withdrew a letter he had written the night before. Opening the envelope and taking out the letter, Harry reread it one last time.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,

I want to thank you both for all the love and support you've offered over the years. The past few months have been hard on me, but I think I've finally gotten past my grief, and have accepted my role as I see it. This may not make sense to you now, but one day soon it probably will. Anyways, I've decided to become a little more independent after the events of the past school year, and one of the first decisions I've made is to repay your kindness the only way I can. The money I've deposited to your account is only a small token of the thanks I can give for accepting me into your family.

If you're anything like Ron, or Ginny, or Fred or George, or the rest of your clan, I know that you'll want to refuse this money. I've left instructions for Gringotts not to allow you to be able to deposit money into my account, ever. Please let me do this for you. You and your family are such wonderful people, and have given me what I so desperately have needed. Let me return your kindness. Don't think of it as money; just think of it as I do, currency. You're family is rich with kindness and love, and I happen to be rich with galleons and sickles.

I know it may be painful for you to remember, but do you recall last summer when you (Mrs. Weasley) encountered that boggart, and saw each member of your family die? I know it was your greatest fear, but for me, to see myself included in your family was one of my happiest moments. I'm sure you know, I never knew what love was until I left the Dursleys' for Hogwarts, and met kind people like you.

So please enjoy this gift. Buy new clothes, a few broomsticks, add a room or two to the Burrow. Mr. Weasley, you can even go out and buy plugs and batteries to your heart's content. Or maybe replace that car of yours I had a hand in ruining. And don't worry about me, I won't mention any figures, but I have plenty more funds where this came from. In fact, I hardly will notice it's missing.

I don't expect you to find this letter till at least the middle of the summer, so if all goes as planned, you won't see me, and get the chance to throttle me until you seriously consider my words, and how much this means to me. It's not an act of charity, it's simply an act of love. Muggles, in situations like this have a wonderful saying....What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine.

So thank you once again, and enjoy. I'll understand if you don't want to mention this to your children (I happen to know Ron's a bit prone to jealousy), or if you don't want to mention it again even to myself. No thanks are needed.

With all my love and thanks,

Harry

'Yes, that will do quite nicely,' Harry thought. He'd always felt guilty when his friends had to purchase used books, or wear hand me down robes. Harry wore Dudley's hand me downs, and he absolutely hated them. He'd been wanting to do this for a long time, but whenever he'd come to Gringotts, Molly Weasley was always hovering over him like the mother hen she was. He'd never had the chance. Now he could.

Last night when Harry had written the letter, he hadn't an exact amount of money in mind to give, but figured it would be a few thousand galleons. However, after knowing he was far wealthier than he thought, Harry decided to increase the amount. Even if he only had access to the 2,792,461 galleons in this vault alone, he could easily last a few decades. He did plan to spend a lot with all the shopping he had planned on today, but Harry couldn't imagine spending more than five or ten thousand galleons at the most.

"Griphook," Harry asked, "if I wish to make a deposit to another vault which I don't own, is that allowed? And more importantly, will anyone else besides the two of us know about it?"

Griphook became nervous again; he obviously didn't hide his emotions very well. "Sir, you are allowed to do with your money as you see fit, including transferring it into another account. As to your other question, I'm not supposed to say."

Harry had suspected this. After all, Dumbledore and the Order had controlled so much of his life already, why stop now? Deciding to take a gamble, Harry approached the tiny goblin slowly and stared directly into his eyes. "Griphook, do you report my actions down here to anyone? I just think it's odd to see only you each time I come to visit my vault. I don't wish to get you in trouble, and I swear that I won't

repeat what you tell me to others, but I'm asking you man to man. What is Albus Dumbledore informed of? He's controlled my actions for far too long, and I'm not surprised to learn he's messing in my affairs here as well. Please tell me, what is he informed of?"

Griphook clearly didn't want to answer, but he did, and Harry thought it was a good thing he remembered the goblin's name after all this time. The conversation he had earlier obviously persuaded Griphook to either trust or like Harry enough to go against Dumbledore's orders.

"Sir," Griphook began, "yes I'm afraid I do report your actions to my superior. Please understand I'm under strict orders to do so. I happen to find you most honorable and polite, so I'll tell you what I must report." Griphook by no accident hinted to Harry. "Although I don't know about all the details, what I do know is this. You have free reign of the funds in this vault to do with as you please. However, a letter is sent to Mr. Dumbledore by my direct superior if you make any single withdrawal over one thousand galleons, or a total withdrawal of twenty thousand galleons in a single month. These instructions do not pertain to transfers of funds to other accounts, as they are not considered withdrawals. Being under age however, you are unable to open new accounts for yourself. You are also not allowed to make any withdrawals from the family vault I mentioned earlier, unless accompanied by your guardian."

Griphook almost seemed to stop there, but continued in a strained voice. "Between you and me sir, a little known loophole in that law is that, although you are unable to make withdrawals from that account being under age, you are still allowed access to it. It's not just money that resides in many family vaults, but personal items of importance, titles and deeds to properties, and other legal documents of the like. As your family vault has been closed for many years, and interest rates have fluctuated in the time that has passed, I don't think anyone really has an accurate account of its exact contents."

So Harry's suspicions were confirmed, Dumbledore was watching what Harry spent money on. It's a good thing Griphook let him know this, because Harry planned on spending a lot of money today.

"Thank you for being honest, I appreciate it," Harry told the little man. "I have a few things to ask of you. Please transfer 300,000 galleons to Arthur and Molly Weasley's family vault, along with this letter. Do not inform them of the transfer; please let them discover it on their own. And can you please set it up so that they're not allowed to deposit money back into my accounts? I also wish to withdrawal exactly one thousand galleons, so as not to arouse any unneeded attention. And I would like to visit my family vault, to asses its value. Do any of these actions require you to make a report to your superior?"

Griphook couldn't help but smirk as he shook his head and said, "No sir, not at all."

And so Griphook helped Harry count out exactly one thousand galleons to put in his moneybag, which grew very heavy. He also helped count out a pile of 300,000 galleons on the far side of the vault, to be transferred over to the Weasleys' later that day. That took some time. Harry's letter was placed atop the large pile, the vault doors were closed, and a few minutes later, after a longer rollercoaster ride than he expected, Harry was deeper under London than he'd ever been before. Apparently when Griphook said one of the lower vaults, he really meant it. Instead of the vaults he normally saw, the Potter family vault, number thirty seven, was in a far different place than Harry'd seen before. He'd always heard rumors of dragons and such guarding the vaults of Gringotts, but Harry had never seen anything close to that level of security before, so didn't hold the rumors true. Now he could say he was wrong. He was in a vast cavern so large Harry couldn't see the ceiling from where he sat in the darkness. The tracks below him were supported by a very narrow rock ledge, surrounded by a deep chasm. Harry peered over the side of the mine cart, and like the ceiling, couldn't find a bottom either. And yes; there were dragons. Ten by Harry's count, smaller than the ones he'd encountered before and of an unknown species, but dangerous none the less. They perched on stone outcroppings along the walls at intervals, keeping a careful watch over the entire cavern.

"Griphook?" Harry was dying to know the answer to this question. "How are those dragons restrained? And are all family vaults under such protection?"

Harry wasn't sure, because he'd never heard a goblin do so before, but he could have sworn he heard Griphook give a short laugh. "Sir, the dragons remain unrestrained to deter unwanted visitors. They are a special species breed only by goblins, and attack anyone not accompanied by a Gringott's employee such as myself, who has clearance. And no, not all family vaults are located on this level. The first hundred vaults in Gringotts are the oldest, and therefore belong to the oldest of the pureblood wizarding families, such as yours. It is rumored, you might like to know, that vaults one through four originally belonged to the families of the four founders of Hogwarts. There's no proof of course, and now the vaults belong to other families, but it is believed by many."

"That is interesting, thanks." Harry couldn't help but be impressed with Griphook's knowledge.

As they slowly rode along the tracks, Harry couldn't help but notice some familiar names on the vaults as they passed by. Snape, Longbottom, Turpin, Nott, Vector, Abbott....the names kept rolling by. Harry even noticed to his horror the name Malfoy, but on closer inspection he laughed out loud as he noticed their vault was number ninety nine. "Pretty close Draco," Harry muttered, "only two vaults away from not being as pureblooded as you'd have us believe." Harry filed this information away to maybe taunt Draco with later, as the mine cart slowed to a stop.

"Here we are sir, vault number thirty seven, Potter family vault." Griphook repeated the procedure asking for the lantern all over again, and approached doors easily as large as those in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. And again, as he'd done before on vault 713 five years ago, he ran his long, boney finger along the seam of the doors in front of him, until a loud click could be heard, but the doors didn't open. Then Griphook stepped back, and turned to address Harry. "Please sir, place the palm of your hand within the designated circle, and clearly speak your full name. It is the last security measure in place to allow access to your vault."

And so Harry did. He stepped forward, placed his right hand where Griphook pointed, and spoke in a clear voice, "Harry James Potter."

The doors opened outward, and Harry stepped into his family's vault in utter shock.

He didn't know what to expect of course. Harry had not speculated about the size of the Potter vault during his long ride there, but he never expected this. The room was huge! At least ten times larger than his other vault, probably more. And it wasn't just the piles of money. There was so much more. Jewels, books, furniture, portraits, weapons. Anything you could think of was all right in front of him. Add an icebox and stove, one could even live within the so called "vault."

"Griphook," Harry began, "is it just me, or is all this just unbelievable?"

Again Harry swore Griphook laughed before returning, "I have been in just a few family vaults on this level, and am not able to tell you what I've seen in them, but I would have to agree with you, this is most impressive. The money and jewels and such are normal, but the furnishings, weapons, and books are most unusual. Normally I believe, they'd be placed within a home. For some reason, your family decided to keep many of their possessions here. If you'd like to look around, please do, but remember, no money from this vault must pass these doors. If that happens, one of the bank managers will become alerted to an illegal withdrawal, and you'll get a far closer look at those dragons you were so interested in before."

Harry could only nod in compliance as he began to walk around. The piles of gold and silver were pretty self explanatory, as were the jewels and other valuables. Although in very large quantities, Harry walked right past them and headed straight for the rear of the room. Books, of all shapes and sizes, were everywhere. Piled high on the furniture, placed in massive bookshelves, even piled on the floor. 'If Hermione were here, she'd never leave,' Harry thought. The artwork was also impressive. Most was wrapped carefully, but a few pieces were opened, and Harry could glimpse the portraits of what must be his relatives.

To the right of the books and furniture, attached to the walls, were the weapons Griphook had previously mentioned. It seemed a whole armory was stockpiled here. Swords, daggers, crossbows, spears, and suits of armor....the list was endless. And on closer inspection,

some of the weapons seemed to glow with a strange light. 'Of course,' Harry thought, 'some of these weapons must be magical. I wonder what properties they might have?'

Working his way back up to the front of the vault, Harry looked at the boxes lined against the walls. These were the most out of place of all the items in the vault, for they were simple muggle packing crates. Harry counted there were six in all, placed one on top of the other in a pyramid fashion. Not worrying about how much time he was taking, Harry walked to the top most box and made to open it, but a dusty ancient looking envelope sat alone on the top box. One word was written on it. Harry.

Slowly, Harry opened the letter addressed to him, and tears leaked from his eyes as he read the letter written to him almost fifteen years ago; from his parents.

Our Dearest Harry,

If you're reading this letter, than we apologize, for it means that we have died, and you have lived. We've known for awhile now that Lord Voldemort has been after us, and apparently he succeeded. We do not know what type of world you've grown up in, but hopefully Voldemort is no more and you've led a happy life with Sirius Black, your godfather. It was our wish that he look out for you if anything should happen, and he's a good man. If Sirius did not survive, which we hope is not the case, than we've placed you in the care of Albus Dumbledore, whom we know is slightly batty, but a kind and gentle man. He'll place you in a home where you're safe and loved, and look after you as you grow up.

If things go as planned, and you're with Sirius, you're thirteen now, and happy birthday! It was our wish to give you back your rightful possessions, which are within the walls of this vault. If things with Sirius did not work out, which we hope never comes to pass, than you'll be informed by Gringott's goblins on the eve of your seventeenth birthday, as you become an adult. Or if you're anything like your father, a true troublemaker, you'll be reading this letter way before you're supposed to.

You may question why this vault contains so many objects that have no right being in a bank vault, and that reason is simple. My parents (this is your Dad speaking now, and I mean the Potters) have known for some time that Voldemort has been after my family for years now, as frontrunners in the resistance against him. Years ago, while I was still at school, my family fled our ancestral home for a safer, more secure location. Giving up our home hurt a great deal, but was necessary to ensure our safety. So it wasn't a total loss, Potter Manner was virtually emptied of its valuables, and its contents brought here. We fear the manner has long since been destroyed, but if it has not, it will belong to you once more when you reach adulthood. My family unfortunately did not find safety where we hid, and both my parents lost their lives when I was in my fifth year at Hogwarts. History seems to be repeating itself now, as your mother and I are about to go into hiding ourselves, with you our infant son. We're going to hide at our summer cottage at Godric's Hollow, and if that too survives the war, it now belongs to you as well.

The crates this letter was placed on contains all the legal documents, explaining the many holdings our family owns, as well as a complete inventory of all things brought here from Potter Manner. Although we don't like to brag, the Potter line is very old and most distinguished, and our ancestors have been very wise in the investments they've made throughout the years. Needless to say, you've just become a very wealthy young man, based on property value alone. The actual money of course is subject to interest rates, which have hopefully been kind over the years.

The small trust fund we've set up separately for you was intended for your use during your school years. If Voldemort has not yet been defeated, there should be enough to last you at least until you graduate, and are able to secure employment. If as we hope, and Voldemort is dead, than we daresay the kind interest rates that should follow will turn your trust fund into a small fortune of its own. Feel free to add any remaining money back to this vault, or keep it separate as you wish.

Just so you know, in case your father is right and you get in here far earlier than you're supposed to, until you are a legal adult, or are allowed to by your guardian (Sirius only), you are not permitted to

spend any money within these walls. However, the furniture, books, papers within these crates, etc. are free for you to take. Just hands off the money! We hope you'll have a nice home one day to furnish with our possessions, and until you do, please keep our family's belongings safely in the Potter vault.

Once again, please believe how much we love you, and know that we died fighting for a world in which we wanted for our son. We could have run, or given in to Voldemort like so many others, but we would never have forgiven ourselves. The world we know now is no world we want you to grow up in. Goodbye Harry, there's not much more to say, and I'm sure over the years you've had all your questions about us answered by Sirius, Remus, and Peter. Once again, we love you, and hope you continue to lead a very happy and joyful life.

With love from beyond,

Mom and Dad

Harry still wept openly as he carefully refolded the letter, and slipped it into a pocket of his robes. He never thought he could be so happy and yet so sad at the same time, yet that's just how Harry felt at the moment.

Happy because now he knew his parents loved him implicitly. Sure, it had been implied before, but Harry had never had any actual proof, it was always just the dreams of a small child, frightened, locked in a small cupboard. But this letter was evidence, proof, that his parents had died not by accident, but all for Harry. And they died to protect him, from the very horrors of Voldemort that again plagued the wizarding world. Reading his parent's letter, Harry had become more determined in his convictions than ever to stand up and fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters. If the cause was good enough for his parents to die for, to protect their son from, then that cause was good enough for Harry. And not just for some future child he may have one day if extremely lucky, but for every child that should never know the terrible childhood Harry had had, growing up without parents, without love, and without hope.

Yet he was also sad, and rightly so. Obviously his parents wished him to grow up with Sirius, and not only did this not happen, but Sirius was now dead, and the letter brought back painful feelings of guilt Harry had thought he'd already dismissed. Harry was also sad because his parents placed their trust in Dumbledore, which he had obviously betrayed just like he did to Harry. Harry may have been placed in a home that was safe, but there was definitely no love. And nowhere in the letter did his parents once mention that damn prophecy. This meant that Dumbledore never told them, a right he never had. His parents never knew why Voldemort was after them, and if they had known, maybe something could have been done differently. Harry had felt himself a pawn of Dumbledore's before, but never more than right at that moment. How could a man not tell the parents of a child; loving, caring parents, that it was their child's destiny to destroy such an evil man?

Harry thought about all these things as he made his way back out the vault's doors, taking only his parent's letter with him. He may come back later to collect some books perhaps, but not now. Not only did he have nowhere to put them, but Harry didn't feel like digging through more of his dead parents' belongings at the moment.

"Griphook, I'd like to go back now please," Harry whispered.

"Yes sir, right away." Griphook seemed to sense Harry's mood, and said no more.

The ride back to Gringotts' lobby was just as long and adventurous as the ride he'd had earlier, but Harry didn't notice. He took the time to collect himself. He still had a lot to do today, and he was more convinced than ever it had to be done. As much as Harry would like to crawl into bed and cry, that would have to wait for now.

The mine cart, twenty minutes later, came to a stop back in the lobby, and Harry crawled out. Before he made his way across the room to the Muggle Exchange Information Desk, he turned to Griphook and kneeled before him. "Griphook, this has been a very emotional and important day for me. Thank you for being honest and for all your help. If there's anything I can ever do for you, please don't hesitate to

ask. I know goblin/wizard relations aren't normally that good, but please look beyond that. Thanks."

Griphook looked flabbergasted and just nodded as Harry stood and walked away slowly. He still had more business in Gringotts, and there was no time like the present. Harry once again went to wait at the end of a line, and soon looked up at a different goblin behind another high desk.

"Can I help you sir?" The goblin asked.

Harry, who had put his sunglasses back on upon entering the lobby once more, tilted his cloak covered head up to the goblin in response. "Yes. I plan on making many purchases in the muggle world in the next few weeks, and need to convert a large amount of galleons into muggle money. I've never converted a large amount before, and was wondering if there's a different exchange rate, or if Gringotts takes a different percent commission on large quantities?"

"Good of you to inquire sir," replied the goblin. "Though exchange rates always stay the same, the normal commission rate of eleven percent drops one percent for amounts over one hundred galleons, and three percent for amounts over one thousand galleons."

"Very good, thank you," said Harry, "but my business in the muggle world will be requiring me to be making purchases far more expensive. Are there any other options?"

The goblin's eyes grew wide at Harry's statement. Harry was talking about a lot of money, and everyone knew that goblins were greedy little devils. "Yes sir, and might I say, very smart of you to ask. There is another, lesser known option that most wizards don't choose because they don't fully understand. Tell me sir, do you know what a credit card is?"

Harry almost laughed at the goblin's question. Although he rarely saw his aunt or uncle use one, as he never was allowed to go shopping, Harry of course knew what a credit card was. He almost laughed because if the goblin was saying what he think he was saying, he

could almost imagine some befuddled pureblood wizard, holding a small piece of plastic, and trying to figure out where the money came from.

"Yes, I'm familiar with credit cards," Harry answered.

"Very good," the goblin continued. "The last option I'm referring to issues a standard muggle credit card in your name, but the bill comes here to us. We convert your purchase amounts into wizarding money using standard exchange rates, and withdraw the amount from your vault. The line of credit offered is always half the amount of gold in the vault in question, and the commission rate that Gringotts implements differ slightly. Instead of a straight percentage made off the amount you spend, Gringotts will deduct a flat rate of fifty galleons per month. That's about the amount we'd take through normal commission rates for you exchanging 6,000 galleons. You can cancel the credit card at any time, but any partial months in service are billed the full fifty galleons."

Harry was ecstatic. It was exactly what he needed; a way to spend muggle money without having to carry around a large amount of cash. And he never had to visit Gringotts again in person if he didn't want to. "Yes, I like that option," Harry informed the goblin. "Is there a similar option offered for dealing with wizarding currency?" Harry figured it couldn't hurt to ask.

"Yes sir!" Again the goblin's eyes grew wide. "We offer an enchanted money pouch that offers a direct link to your vault. Only your hand can take money out, but anyone can make deposits. Simply speak aloud the amount you wish to withdrawal, reach in your hand, and the correct amount of galleons will be inside. Normally we offer this moneybag for the price of three hundred galleons, but for such a fine customer as yourself, I'll lower the price to two hundred."

Harry inwardly laughed again. Had he known of it before, he would have paid four hundred galleons for such an easy way to access his vault. But he held in the smile that threatened his face, because he knew what type of creatures goblins were. Not all of them were as honest as Griphook. "I'll tell you what," he told the goblin, "lower the price of the money pouch to one hundred fifty galleons, and I'll take

that, plus the credit card with the guarantee I won't cancel for at least a year. Do we have a deal?" Harry supposed to some people, like the Weasleys, the four hundred fifty galleons Harry was about to spend was a great deal of money. But taking into consideration the two million odd galleons in his trust fund, not to mention his family's fortune he'd have access to in about a year, Harry had no quarrels about spending the money.

Obviously the goblin fell in line with the Weasley way of thinking, and didn't even try to haggle over the price. "Deal!" He yelled out. "Please step inside my office sir to fill out the appropriate paperwork, and we'll have you on your way in no time. Would you like some tea?" Harry wasn't too surprised that the goblin agreed as quickly as he did, but when he put a closed sign on his desk, in front of a line of at least ten people, Harry was mildly shocked.

Still, he liked the quick results, politely declined the offer of tea, and entered the goblin's office. Once in a semblance of privacy, Harry once again exchanged the sunglasses he'd been wearing for his normal ones, so he could properly read the paperwork. It all looked very standard, and he had no problems signing the papers, but Harry knew he once again had to resolve the problem of Dumbledore.

"Excuse me sir?" Harry addressed the goblin. "Everything seems to be in order, and I've filled out all the information required, but I do have an inquiry which may influence my final decision." Harry noticed the goblins ears peak up at this statement. Obviously he didn't want to lose such a profitable opportunity.

"I've come to understand some certain unorthodox security precautions have been placed on my accounts. I know that Mr. Albus Dumbledore is notified if certain criteria are met. It is my understanding that by signing these documents, I'm no way meeting these criteria that will inform Mr. Dumbledore of my actions. I'd like your assurance that I'm correct in my assumptions, and a truthful answer either way would be very profitable for Gringotts."

The goblin looked oddly at Harry, and began to speak. "Sir, I'm not sure which security precautions you speak of, but be sure that all our business dealings are quite confidential. If you'd like more

assurances....” The goblin stopped speaking once Harry had lowered his hood and removed his ski cap. Scar and blazing green eyes visible, there was no question the Goblin had recognized him now.

“Mr. Pott-tter!” The goblin stuttered. “I must say what an honor it is to be doing business with a person such as yourself. Yes, now I understand your inquires. If I may be so bold? Is it your desire to keep the matters we discussed away from the attention of Mr. Dumbledore?”

“Yes,” answered Harry, “it is.”

“Well then sir, as long as no conditions are breached that require a bank manager to inform Mr. Dumbledore of your actions, all your business is kept quite confidential. No one else need know. However, while I assume guidelines have been agreed upon by the bank managers and Mr. Dumbledore, I personally have no idea what they might be. I could always ask, but that would lead to the bank managers becoming aware of such inquires. But if I may, paperwork related to the Muggle Exchange Department usually stays within it. I think you’ll probably be safe as long as you adhere to whatever guidelines have been set down.”

Again, a goblin told Harry exactly what he needed to know. As long as he never made a withdrawal or purchase in excess of one thousand galleons, or twenty thousand within one month, Dumbledore will never know. Credit card or not, enchanted money pouch or not. Harry only had a small amount of experience dealing with goblins, but already he could appreciate them. Very strict and confidential, they would abide by rules and laws to the letter. But any loophole that may exist would not bother the goblins, and they themselves probably took advantage of a few cleverly written laws.

“Very good sir! I think we have a deal then.” Harry handed the paperwork back to the goblin. “And I thank you for your honesty and guidance. I trust that our conversation and my presence here today can stay between ourselves?”

Again the goblin smiled. “Yes, absolutely Mr. Potter. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.” Harry couldn’t help but think the

goblin's smile was caused by the topmost paper, which was the purchase slip for the enchanted moneybag. The price had been filled in at three hundred galleons. Apparently, Harry had forgotten his good customer discount.

And so with that, fifteen minutes later, Harry walked out of Gringotts, into the bright light of midday. Having once again donned his sunglasses and ski cap, Harry looked up at the sun and estimated the time to be about eleven am. He'd probably spent close to four hours in Gringotts, and still had much to do that day. So with his new credit card in wallet, and enchanted money pouch in pocket, Harry set out to do some serious spending.

AUTHOR NOTES:

I've been getting a lot of good responses, so I decided to post this chapter early. I have the first 5 written already, and wanted to releases them at about week apart, but the first two were kind of boring. This provides a taste of what the next three chapters will be like. I know it's cliché to make Harry rich, but I figured he had to be, coming from such an old family line. I did however only make him a millionaire, and only added two comas to his net value. I read one story once (I think it was written by Muahahaha) where Harry had like 46,762,223,456,483,439,120 galleons in the bank, plus owned half the wizarding world, including Hogwarts. Not too realistic, so I tried to tone it down. For anyone interested in the muggle money exchange rate, I've decided to make one up. I don't know if it's accurate or not, but for the rest of my story, 1 galleon = 4 pounds = 6 dollars, roughly. Like I said in my bio, chapters 3-8 will be a lot of guilty pleasures, but they do serve a purpose, explaining where Harry gets all the stuff he'll be using the rest of the story. If you like the tone I've taken so far, stick around, you'll love the action picking up around Ch. 10 (just a hint, but there will be a major confrontation before the end of the summer.) Thanks again.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you

would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 4 – Shopping Spree

Upon exiting Gringotts, Harry called for Hedwig, who was perched on a nearby lamppost, and headed back towards the Leaky Cauldron. Although Diagon Alley had always seemed busy to Harry in the past, today's crowds seemed not as large. He suspected it was because school just let out, and people were spending time with their families. Regardless, Harry enjoyed the quiet streets. He felt more relaxed looking into windows alone, and he supposed there was less chance that he could be recognized.

“What should we buy first Hedwig?” Harry asked his owl, who was perched on his shoulder. “How about this? Let’s head to Eeylops Owl Emporium to get you some owl treats, and then I can check out that magical instrument shop next door? Sound good?”

Hedwig, who never thought owl treats were a bad idea, hooted in agreement. Eeylops was located just in front of the Leaky Cauldron, so Harry supposed it was a good idea to start there anyways. Rather than running all over Diagon Alley, Harry would just make one big loop. ‘It may take all day,’ Harry thought, ‘but then again, I’m in no rush.’ Harry had already decided to spend the night in a rented room. He had three days before the Order would expect a letter from him, and the Dursleys certainly wouldn’t care if Harry was missing for a day or two.

The trip to Eeylops only lasted a short while; just a few minutes to buy the owl treats, and another few to take a quick look around the store. The witch working behind the counter was impressed with Harry’s enchanted money pouch, so Harry left soon after so as not to draw attention.

The shop right next door was one he’d been into once before, but Harry was three years older now, and had picked up an interest of magical instruments from his teachers the past few years. Especially Dumbledore. Harry might be angry with his Headmaster, but he still felt guilty for trashing his office. “Well,” said Harry, “Maybe I’ll get him something to make up for it.”

But before he went looking for strange silver spheres that apparently did nothing, Harry had already promised himself a new watch. He'd wanted a magical watch ever since he'd seen one, and now was his chance.

"Hello there," the man in the shop greeted Harry. "Welcome to my shop. Just browsing today, or is there something specific I can help you with?"

"Both actually," Harry replied. "I'd like to spend some time looking around, but I know for sure I need a new wristwatch. I've never owned a magical one before, and I'm interested in them."

"Certainly, sir. We have a wide variety to chose from, both in style and in function. Let me show you some selections."

Harry followed the man to a glass cabinet not too far away, making sure to keep his head down and covered. He was starting to get a headache from squinting his eyes through the dark sunglasses, and hoped he could resolve that problem soon.

"Well, here we are. Do you have a specific model in mind?" The man asked.

"Er, not really. I know I still want to be able to tell the normal time. Some wizard clocks I've seen don't show that. I've seen a clock with planets on it, and another with hands representing members of a family that point to their location, but I'm not too sure what they do."

"You really have no idea what you're looking for then, do you?" Although it sounded rude, the man simply stated a fact. "Well, let me explain to you a few different choices. This watch here is like the one you mentioned, and has a maximum number of six hands that you can assign to different people, usually friends and family. You'll need a piece of their hair for the spells to work, and like you said, it tracks their location. All my watches tell the correct time, on this model you just have to press the button on the side and say 'tempus.' The correct time will be display for thirty seconds, and then the watch goes back to its normal display. Another popular piece I have is a comment watch, and I'm sure you've seen these before. The display

looks blank, but once it becomes used to your schedule, it displays certain messages. At dinnertime it may say 'Time to Eat,' or if you're late for a class it will remind you. Some people don't like to be bossed around by their timepieces, but it's especially popular with younger children."

Harry couldn't help but think that his roommate Neville could use a watch that that. "Anything else you have?" Harry asked.

"Well," the man responded, "we do have a few models that are pocket watches, but I know those are out of style with the younger crowds. There's a new model wristwatch, but I don't know much about it yet, and it's awfully expensive."

Harry asked to see it, thinking it couldn't possibly be too expensive for him. Harry had planned to spend a lot of money on himself today, and wasn't going to back down now. After all, he was making up for fifteen years of neglect.

"Here it is young man. There's a complete manual that comes with its purchase, and explains all the features. What I do know is that it's charmed to be waterproof, shockproof, and indestructible. It also has a dark arts detector. I'm not positive, but it beeps or flashes or something when it senses dark magic. The detection levels are adjustable, and I know a few aurors have purchased this model already just for that feature. Anyway, it's all in the manual." The small booklet was pushed across the counter to Harry, and he paged through it briefly. He saw a few entries about the dark arts detector, and even something about shield charms. He didn't have time to read the whole book now, so Harry put it aside and looked at the watch itself.

It was a two toned watch with a metal band, and looked just like most watches he'd seen. The face had the normal hour, minute, and second he'd expected, and a small circle right above the six that glowed with a faint light. Harry supposed the small circle had something to do with the watch's extra features. "Do you happen to know what this watch is made of?" Harry asked the man.

"It comes in a few varieties," he answered. "That model you're holding is gold and silver. I also carry a solid gold model, and a platinum and gold model. I'm all out of the solid silver ones, and I think the company makes a stainless steel model as well, but I don't carry that. This is such a high end watch, most people willing to spend that kind of money want only the best."

"I agree. In fact, I'll take the gold and platinum model please." Harry decided to stay away from silver, in case he accidentally came into contact with Remus. The man behind the counter obviously wasn't expecting to make a sale, probably from Harry's appearance, but hurried back to the storeroom once he got over his initial shock.

While the owner was in the backroom, Harry browsed the store, looking at a few odds and ends. Very few objects he recognized, but some he did from Dumbledore's desk, and a few more from shops in Hogsmeade. Harry returned to the watch cabinet to await the man, and looked in the display case next to it. In the case was a display with a small sign that read "Magical Jewelry." A necklace here, a few bracelets there, and a box of rings of all shapes and colors. It was this box that interested Harry. He'd been meaning to purchase a ring.

A few moments later the man retuned, with an open box the size of a small book. "I took the liberty, sir, of opening the box to make sure I had the correct model, and to set the time. I noticed you're not wearing a watch at the moment. Would you like me to wrap it up, or would you like to wear it out?"

Harry wanted to wear it, so he could keep track of the time for the rest of the day. The watch slipped onto his left wrist easily, was smooth and cool to the touch, and had a comfortable weight to it. Harry didn't notice before, but the watch face was a deep charcoal grey, almost black, and Harry liked it very much.

"I'd also like to look in that box of rings you have there please." Harry pointed to the jewelry display, and a moment later the box was on top of the counter, and the shopkeeper was fishing through it.

"Now all of these rings have different magical properties, depending on the stones, metals, and additional spells cast. I would suggest a gold or platinum piece to complement your watch."

Harry agreed with the man, and looked at a few rings that were already laid out on the counter. Harry wasn't sure if it was just his taste, but he thought most of the rings were just downright gaudy. "Er, most of these are a bit much, do you have anything simpler?" Thinking that gold was one of the Gryffindor colors, Harry asked the man, "Maybe a gold ring with a red stone?"

Indeed there were a few gold and red choices; four to be exact. One Harry dismissed immediately; it was hideous. The three remaining were all attractive. They all had a single stone, and one was a lot darker than the other two. Of the two rings with brighter gems, one had a round stone, and had an animated snake continually circling it. The other had a flat, square stone, with runes engraved along the ring band. The darker stone, the shopkeeper informed him was made of garnet, and not as expensive as the two ruby rings. Remembering that rubies were his birthstone, Harry placed the garnet ring aside.

Harry asked the shopkeeper, "What can you tell me about these two rings?"

"Well," he said "the one with the runes just came in about seven months ago. An old witch came in to sell it. It belonged to her late husband, and she couldn't stand to look at it anymore, so I gave her a good price. I don't know much about the runes, never studied them myself, but the old lady said that the ring had properties to keep the old man virile, if you know what I mean."

Harry certainly did know what he meant, and Harry also knew he was far too young to be worrying about that yet. "What about the other ring?"

"Can't say I know much about that one. It was part of an estate collection my pop bought back when I was a lad; when he ran the shop. Don't remember which family it came from, and it's been here since." The man paused to look at the ring, and then continued. "It's attractive enough, but not too many people are fond of snakes these

days. Also, the damn thing has a habit of hissing at you if you put the ring on."

Harry's ears perked up at this. He had already seen the animated snake, but hadn't expected it to hiss. He wondered if he could talk to the snake using Parseltongue, like he spoke to the image of snakes on the door to the Chamber of Secrets. He didn't want to frighten the shopkeeper though, so Harry kept quiet. Also, it was a well known fact that Harry Potter was a Parselmouth.

"May I try it on?" The shopkeeper nodded, and Harry slipped the ring on his right hand. It seemed big at first, but magically adjusted to fit whichever finger he placed it on. And sure enough, it hissed at him.

"Hisss....Who are you....Pleassse....Put me down...." Harry smiled at the ring, and took it off quickly so as not to upset the small creature. He would have plenty of opportunity to talk to it later.

Harry handed the ring back to the man and said, "I'll take it, but please pack this one up." The man nodded, but looked at Harry like he was crazy. He dipped into the back room again, and Harry again browsed through the merchandise. He'd decided to put off buying anything for Dumbledore. Today was a day for Harry alone.

The shopkeeper returned, and approached the counter once more. "Anything else today sir?" He asked.

"No thank you, I think that's all for now," replied Harry.

"Very good then, let me ring up your purchases." The shopkeeper left Harry at the display counter and walked to the front door where a small register was kept. "Let's see, the watch, platinum and gold being the most expensive model, is seven hundred forty galleons and fourteen sickles. The ring, gold and ruby of excellent quality, is another matter. Normally I'd ask around five hundred galleons for a piece like it, but that particular one hasn't been doing anything but collecting dust for the past sixty years. And since I don't know what my father paid for it, I'll only charge you an even one hundred fifty. So that brings the total to eight hundred ninety galleons and fourteen sickles, sir."

Harry agreed to the price, and was silently happy with the discount of the ring. It was the second discount he'd been offered that day, and Harry had to remember that people seemed to take care of high rollers. Harry spoke the amount into his moneybag, pulled out his money, and accepted the small parcel from the shopkeeper. He originally planned on wearing the ring like his new watch, but wasn't up for a long conversation with a confused snake just yet.

Harry left the shop, and once again Hedwig flew down from a nearby lamppost onto his shoulder. "You're going to get a bit of exercise today, aren't you girl?" Hedwig nodded in agreement, and Harry proceeded down the street. A glance at his new watch showed it to be a quarter till twelve, and Harry was certainly starting to get hungry, but was too excited about shopping to stop and eat just yet.

Continuing down the street, Harry passed Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor, the cauldron shop where he bought his first pewter cauldron, and a small unnamed shop that seemed to be closed. An intersection approached, and Harry could almost smell the dark magic wafting in from Knockturn Alley. Harry remembered being down that way, before his second year, and had no interests in returning. At least not till nightfall.

A few buildings later and Harry opened the door to the shop he was aiming for; Leed's Luggage. Hedwig flew away as he walked inside, and approached the short bald man sitting in a comfortable looking chair. The man was asleep, and for a moment Harry wondered if he was a customer, before he noticed the nametag identifying him as Lemarin Leeds.

"Ahemm..." Harry coughed into his hand to wake the man. He stirred, but did not wake. So again, Harry cleared his throat, and this time "accidentally" bumped into the chair rousing the short Mr. Leeds.

"Oh, umm, excuse me there, must have dosed off for a second." The man didn't seem too embarrassed, and Harry wondered if Mr. Leeds had a habit of sleeping during work. "Sorry about that," he continued, "welcome to my shop. Magical trunks, bags, satchels, cases, and

pretty much any other thing you can think of. What can I do for you, Mr....?"

Harry got caught off guard for a moment, but remembered his identity with Stan from the Knight Bus, so he answered, "Umm, Thomas. Dean Thomas. I'm looking for a new trunk for school. My old one's pretty beat up, and I've outgrown it as well; need a bit more space."

And it was true; his old trunk could no long hold all his clothes, school books, potion supplies, broomstick, and collectables Harry had picked up over the years. Even though it was magically expanded inside, it was still too small. And Harry hadn't even made the bulk of his purchases yet today.

"Very good Mr. Thomas. We've a few models of trunks. The simplest would be a single cavity model like the one you most likely own now. The inside can be expanded up to three hundred percent, and it locks with a traditional key, no other spells."

"Umm, no thank you Mr. Leeds, and please call me Dean. I think I'm more interested in something with quite a bit more room. One of my professors awhile back had a trunk with multiple compartments, and even had a large room. I'm looking for something like that." Harry of course was remembering Moody's magic trunk, and how it could be advantageous to be able to crawl inside for a bit of privacy.

"Yes Dean, and please call me Lemarin," he kindly answered back. "I stock three models in that description. The first trunk has four compartments, opens by traditional key as well, and is damage resistant. It will last a long while, and was originally intended for use by heavy travelers. The first three compartments all are the same size, and are expanded two hundred percent of the trunk's total volume. The forth compartment measures twenty five square feet, but is only three feet deep. Easy enough to reach in a grab whatever one needs; no need for ladders.

"The second trunk I offer is the industry standard, and has been for decades. In my opinion, it's a little overkill for a school trunk, but you decide. Seven compartments, also opening by traditional key, with the additional option of voice activation. First four compartments are

the same size, again two hundred percent trunk volume. Spaces five and six are a bit larger, are accessible by either ladder or slide, and measure six feet wide by six feet long by eight feet deep. The seventh and final compartment is a much larger room, about fifteen feet by fifteen feet, accessible by again either slide or ladder. The outer shell of the trunk is damage and spell resistant, but not spellproof. A strong incendiary spell or such can mark the surface, and a Reductor curse or anything much stronger will affect the magical properties of the inner cavities.”

Harry was so far impressed. The last trunk described sounded just like the one Moody was locked in for a year, and Harry couldn’t wait to hear about the third option. “What’s the final choice?” He asked.

There was no doubt Lemarin’s eyes almost popped out of his head, and he just started at Harry. “Is there something the matter Lemarin?” Harry asked.

“No sir.” Lemarin licked his lips. “It’s just that most people find that the last option I mentioned more than meets their needs. The last model I have to offer is one of my most prized works, but it’s very expensive. It was a custom piece I made to order, but the customer I was making it for died before its completion. I kept the initial down payment of course, but the family didn’t want to pay the remaining cost, so I kept the trunk. It’s far too much for my simple needs, but its display attracts a rather lot of attention.”

“May I see it?” Harry was very excited.

“Certainly, follow me please.” Lemarin led Harry through a back door, across a room filled with boxes and packing equipment, to a polished set of large oak doors. Lemarin stepped forward to grab the door handles, and paused as he turned around to address Harry. “This Dean is my life’s work, the only one of its kind. I call it, the Leeds Mark One.” And with that he opened the doors.

The trunk certainly was a thing of beauty. It was a deep walnut color, with bronze etchings inlaid in the polished wood. It was slightly wider than a normal trunk, longer too it seemed. The partition of the top and bottom halves was almost seamless, Harry could only tell because

the bronze markings separated the two sides. There were no keyholes or openings anywhere along the surface, but an intricate circle was outlined in the crafted metal inlays on the top of the trunk. And above that circle, also inlaid in the same intricate bronze work, was a name. Arched in a manner that matched the curve of the circle perfectly, was written the word, "POTTER."

"Where did this come from?" Harry whispered. He didn't know what to say, or what to think.

Lemarin took Harry's odd behavior as awe. "Beautiful isn't it. It's been over twenty years since I've made it, and I still shudder. At my age, I don't think I could even come close to the craftsmanship I once showed. I spent two full months carving the shell from a single piece of wood, another two for the spellwork alone, and the bronze inlays I had designed from a talented blacksmith I once knew. He supplied the plans and materials, and I spent five weeks perfecting that."

Harry simply nodded, still unable to think clearly. Who was this Potter? Was it a relative, his father maybe? Or was it someone else by the same name, with no relation. To Harry, it didn't matter. It had his name on it. It would be his.

"Yes, um, Lemarin?" Harry paused. "I'd like to purchase this trunk please. Could you describe its features?" Harry barely even got out that much.

Again, not for the first time today, Harry got a queer look and a long pause before Lemarin spoke again. "This trunk too has seven compartments, but is very different from the other. The first two cavities are the most normal I suppose, and are roughly four times the size they appear to be. The third compartment is a large area, suitable for habitat if one desires. I was never instructed what to do with the space, so it's mostly empty as of now. Polished wooden floors and paneled walls adorn the area, and are maintained by spells of my own design. The wood is impossible to scratch, and is always kept to a high polish. It's only furnishings are a study table and four chairs, and a trio of matching bookcases along three of the walls. The forth compartment is the same size, and empty as well, but not as luxurious. Plank wood floors and plastered walls; no furnishings. The

fifth compartment is set up as a dueling chamber. Raised platform, distance markings, all made in accordance with world competition dueling guidelines at the time. A rack of practice dummies are mounted along the far wall, which were supplied to me by a company no longer in business. They properly gauge a spell's power and accuracy, and the dummies are capable of dodging spells if ordered. They cannot fight back or block spells, but can take a good beating and still be repaired from most spell damage, if not too extensive. Cushioning charms have been placed around the room to prevent injury, and the walls are spellproof, to prevent the trunk's damage. As the dueling platform does not take up too much space, there is a large area off to the side that remains empty."

Harry's eyes were glossing over. He would have purchased the trunk, no matter its options, just because it had his name on it, and it was so beautiful. But as Lemarin described each compartment in detail with pride, Harry started to bounce from one foot to the other. So far, this was exactly what he needed.

"The sixth compartment," Lemarin continued, "is my favorite. Full living quarters, large enough for four. It contains a master bedroom with king size bed, full furnishings, walk in closet, and private bath. Probably the most luxurious room I've ever been in. The sitting room is comfortable, not too large, and houses two matching couches and three armchairs. No fireplace of course, the room is still in a trunk, but small efficient space heaters are hidden within the stone walls. The original buyer provided some family tapestries which still hang from the walls as well. And lastly is a small kitchen. A table large enough for four, small stove, and oven. There's an enchanted icebox as well, but no luxuries there. I couldn't get the spells right. But it is charmed to stock the essentials; eggs, bacon, milk, juice, etc. The pantry is charmed as well. Bread, beans, potatoes; just your average foodstuffs. Neither the icebox nor pantry will ever run out, but I imagine the same foods must get boring after awhile. Cooking utensils are located in two cabinets, along with plates, bowls, glasses, and flatware enough for four. A supply of recycled water is located in a hidden tank, and is charmed to self-clean dishes placed in the sink each night."

"The final compartment was an odd request, but I did it none the less. It's totally bare, and all the walls, the floor, and the ceiling and been transfigured into stone. It's an impressively large room, about the size of Gringott's lobby I'd say. No inner furnishing or other structures, just one big room.

"Lastly," Lemarin ended, "are the trunk's special features. In the last five compartments, there's a small magical portal that lets you through into the others. So it's possible to visit all the compartments without ever leaving the trunk. The trunk itself opens by palm recognition, much like a Gringott's vault. Place your palm in the circle, speak your full name, and declare which compartment you want to open. No one else can get into the trunk, unless you key them into the security circle. The trunk will always close behind you, and opens the same way from the inside. This option's not unheard of for other custom jobs, and I usually suggest you always allow at least one other person access. If anything should happen, well, it would be most difficult to gain access to this trunk uninvited. The trunk shell itself is practically impervious against muggle and magical means. I suppose if enough wizards shoot a spell at the same time, it might damage it, but it'd take a lot of power. All that bronze metalwork is enchanted to keep people out. The trunk also shrinks on voice command. Just put your hand in the circle, and speak out loud 'shrink,' and the trunk goes down to the size of a deck of cards. To return, place a finger in the circle, speak 'enlarge,' and the trunk returns to normal size. And of course, the trunk's never been tested against unforgivables, but I wouldn't be surprised if it held up."

Harry wanted it more than anything he'd ever wanted before. With the exception of his Firebolt, and only because it was a gift from Sirius, this would be his most prized possession. "How much?" Harry asked.

Again, Harry got that queer look. "You're not serious are you Dean? This thing costs a small fortune, and has no business serving as a school trunk. I'm not sure I'd sell it to anyone anyways. This has been my pride and joy for over twenty years!"

"I am very serious," stated Harry, "but before we discuss the price, can you tell me more about who ordered it?"

Harry could tell Lemarin thought he was pulling the shopkeeper's leg, but let Harry know the answer to his question anyways. "Well, the work was commissioned by old man Potter, as the name says. It was back during the height of the Dark Lord's power. Everyone was scared, and he asked me to make a trunk for him; for his family. He had an idea to hide in plain sight, you see. No one had ever thought about living in a trunk before. It'd always been possible I suppose, just never comfortable. Harold was a good man, an old friend of my father's, and that's the only reason I accepted the job. Normally I'd never spend so much time on one single project. I don't know if Harold meant to keep the trunk for himself, or give it to his kid, but it didn't really matter. Potter died a few weeks before I finished, and the family was too busy mourning to care what happened to it. Not many years later, James was killed as well. No one since has had a real interest. It sure is a fine piece of work, no one argues that, but there's not much need for such a detailed trunk."

Harry had suspected the trunk belonged to one of his family, but he didn't think it would be someone as close as his grandfather. He had thought maybe a distant cousin or something, at best. But the name Harold was most definitely his grandfather. He had been named for him after all, at least according to Sirius and Remus. This trunk was another piece of the puzzle of Harry's missing life.

"Mr. Leeds," Harry starred at the man as he removed his sunglasses, "like I said, I am very serious about purchasing this trunk, and I hope you find me worthy. I promise to take good care of it." Harry knew it was a gamble, but didn't think Leeds would go for it any other way. So as he spoke his next line, Harry pulled down his hood and took off his ski cap, clearly showing his scar. "Please tell me the price of my grandfather's trunk?"

A half hour later, Harry left Leed's Luggage with a miniature trunk the size of a deck of cards. After reviving an unconscious Lemarin, Harry explained why he was in disguise; trying to avoid the public. It didn't take too long to convince Lemarin to sell Harry the trunk. After all, if things had gone as planned, it might have been his now anyways. Lemarin added Harry's palm ID into the security circle, showed him how to add other people, and then removed his wife's ID to show Harry how to remove people as well. He explained that Harry would

have to remove Lemarin himself, because a person couldn't remove themselves, but Harry decided not to. Harry asked Lemarin if he didn't mind keeping his access. It was an odd question, and Harry explained he didn't want anyone he knew to get into his new trunk. Harry had plans for some of those compartments, and not all of them were legal. Lemarin agreed, and was instructed to open the trunk in the presence of Dumbledore (or another Order member) on the occurrence that Harry had been declared dead or missing for one month's time. Harry wasn't planning on dying anytime soon, but some of his actions the following year would be very dangerous.

After throwing his earlier purchases, along with Dudley's old backpack in the first compartment, Harry shrunk the trunk in size and walked out the door an even twenty three hundred galleons poorer. Harry had had to make three separate withdrawals to avoid Dumbledore's attention, but his new trunk was worth the large price.

It was now almost one, and Harry couldn't hold out on eating much longer. The small bowl of cereal he had that morning wasn't much of a breakfast, even by Dursley standards. He thought about going back to Florean's for some ice cream, but that wasn't too nutritious. The only other place Harry knew of where he could get some food was the Leaky Cauldron, so that's where he went. The streets were still quite empty, and Harry was glad to be avoiding the crowds of late summer.

After crossing the magical barrier into the tavern, Hedwig faithfully perched on shoulder, Harry approached Tom the barman. He had planned on renting a room for the night anyways, so wasn't worried about giving his identity away. Besides, Tom had proved trustworthy in the past. Of all the people who worked in Diagon Alley, Harry knew Tom the best from his fortnight stay there the summer he blew up his Aunt Marge.

"Tom, may I speak to you in a back room please?" Harry didn't want to give away his secret in front of a bar full of strangers, so he whispered to Tom and walked directly into one of the private dining rooms. Tom did follow, and once they were alone, Harry lowered his cloak and removed his muggle disguise.

"Harry, thought that sounded like you! I haven't seen you in a long while." It warmed Harry's heart that not only Tom had recognized him, but remained on very friendly terms as well. "What can I do for you?"

"Tom," replied Harry, "it's good to see you too. I don't want to be seen, so sorry about sneaking around, but I haven't been having much luck with the press lately. I also want to rent a room for later tonight if you've got one, maybe tomorrow night as well. But for now, just a ham sandwich, some crisps, and a butterbeer if you please."

"Sure thing Harry," Tom assured, "them articles last year were horrible. I don't blame you much. I hear lots of whispered conversations going on in here, and I've heard about some of the stuff you've been putting up with. That horrible Skeeter woman! Just give me a moment, lunch'll be out shortly."

Harry gave a thanks and sat alone with Hedwig in the private room. Tom returned a moment later with a mug of butterbeer, and five minutes later with a large ham and swiss sandwich on rye, with all the trimming, and a platter of crisps. Harry tucked in, occasionally feeding Hedwig a crisp or bacon piece, and even a few sips of butterbeer. Hedwig drank from Harry's goblet of pumpkin juice all the time at Hogwarts, but this was her first time having butterbeer. She liked it!

"Slow down Hedwig!" Harry laughed. "If you're anything like a house elf, you'll be drunk after a few more sips! Don't want you to be flying into buildings like Errol, now do we?"

Hedwig most certainly did not want to be like Errol, the Wesleys' old family owl, and gave Harry a hard nip on his ear for even mentioning it. Errol had never made a good impression with Hedwig in all the time they'd known each other. 'Nor does Pigwidgeon,' Harry thought, 'come to think of it.'

After the leisurely long lunch, and another mug of butterbeer which Hedwig wisely left alone, Harry stepped back out into Diagon Alley to resume his activities. Tom had given Harry a room key when he dropped off the bill, and Harry left a generous tip. Another glance at his watch told him it was now almost half two, and Harry thought he might have about three hours at the most before it started to get dark.

The next few shops in the loop Harry had decided on weren't much use to him. A used robe shop where he knew Ginny shopped was the first. A junk shop, where Percy had once found an old ripped book about Hogwart's prefects followed. Olivander's was next, and Harry did plan on going in there, but he wasn't ready yet. It was widely known that members of the magical community were only allowed one wand, unless working for the Ministry of Magical Law Enforcement. You couldn't even buy a replacement without a certificate of a broken wand issued by the Ministry.

Harry wasn't exactly an auror, and he had a perfectly working wand that he was fond of, so he skipped that shop for now. But he knew he would be back soon. If Harry was planning on besting Voldemort one day, he would need a different wand. Their two wands were brothers, sharing the same magical core, and did not duel well together. That fact had saved Harry's life last year, and he wasn't about to trade in his lucky wand now. But he did want another wand to be able to duel with Voldemort; he just didn't know his cover story yet. Harry decided to work on that tonight.

Harry continued along his loop, now rounding the end and walking back towards the Leaky Cauldron. Harry had no need for joke supplies at Gamble & Japes, or new pets at the Magical Menagerie. He did stop in to the Apothecary to top off his potion supplies, and decided to pick up a few extras as well.

Harry was never the best potions student, no doubts about that, but that was mostly due to Snape riding Harry at every opportune moment. If left on his own, Harry was a capable, if only slightly above average potions student. He'd only taken his OWL's a week ago, but Harry expected to receive a good enough grade to be allowed to take Snape's NEWT prep class, with a little help from Professor McGonagall. She had promised to help Harry become an auror, and while that was no longer his plan, she would help him get into the potions class as she promised.

So Harry picked up an advanced NEWTs potions kit, along with a gold, silver, and copper cauldron that would be required for some of the more advanced potions. They weren't school requirements

because of the cost, but seeing as he could afford them, Harry much preferred to have his own than share the school's communal equipment. As he paid the Asian witch behind the counter, Harry had an idea, and asked a question.

"Excuse me ma'am, do you happen to know of any potions for correcting eyesight? I normally wear muggle eyeglasses, but have recently broken them."

The attractive witch shook her head in answer. "Sorry, medi-witches at St. Mungo's might know of something, but I don't think anything like that's been invented. If you're looking for a better option though, there's a small shop tucked back in a corner somewhere that sells magical eyeglasses, hearing aids, and other prosthetics."

Harry expected the woman to tell him where the shop might be, but froze in fear a second later when she peeked her head into the back room and yelled out, "Cho! Cho! Where's that prosthetics shop where we get grandpa's hearing aid?"

Harry plainly saw that the woman he'd been talking with had been Asian, and he had already admitted that she was very attractive, but he had no idea that Cho's apparent mother worked in the Apothecary. If anyone would recognize Harry and spread the word he'd been around, it would be Cho. They hadn't exactly parted on the best terms last year, and Harry had learned the hard way she easily gave in to gossip and rumor. While Harry was still physically attracted to Cho, he had well gotten past any romantic notions he had once held.

Luck was with Harry when Cho didn't come up front to answer. Instead she yelled back to her mother, "Mom, I'm in the fire talking to Michael! What do you want?"

"That prosthetics shop dear, the one that opened last summer. Where did you say it was again?" Her mother seemed to be used to her behavior, but Harry thought, especially on the first day back from school, Cho was being entirely rude.

"It's back towards Knockturn Alley. You almost have to go in it, but the shop's tucked behind the ice cream shop. Now please leave me

alone, Michael's only allowed to floo call for a half hour!" He was glad Cho had the answer, and that her new relationship with Ginny's ex seemed to be flourishing, but Harry couldn't get over the way she treated her mother. Harry never spoke that way, not even to his Aunt Petunia!

On thanking Mrs. Chang, Harry left the shop and continued on his loop. The break he took from the sunglasses during lunch had stopped his headache, and the glasses could wait. He had to go there anyways, but not until it was darker. With less than three hours till dark, Harry walked into Flourish & Blotts.

This, Harry had planned, would be most of his purchases for the day. He had big plans for the next year, and they required much reading. If she'd done anything in the past five years, Hermione had proven knowledge really did mean power.

In the past, Harry had never really given much thought to the wealth of information on all these shelves. Usually he bought his schoolbooks, spent a few minutes looking through the Quidditch section, and then herded Hermione outside. Now Harry had almost three hours to kill, and decided to spend the time carefully searching the popular bookstore.

Picking up a shopping basket (magically expanded and charmed to be feather-light), Harry went straight to the textbook section. Like with Potions, Harry had a clear idea which OWLs he might have passed, and which ones he might have failed. There was no chance he'd passed History; Harry had fallen asleep during that test. Astronomy was a similar situation, where he had been too busy watching Hagrid fight off the aurors to correctly fill in his star chart. For Hermione's sake, he hoped the examiners would curve that one. And passing Divination was always a gamble, because Harry had no idea how to complete one homework assignment or exam without making up half of the answers. The rest, however, Harry thought he stood a fair chance of scoring well on.

So Harry selected all the textbooks required for years six and seven, for the remaining subjects of Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, and

Potions. He also picked up a complete set of books on the subjects he'd never taken. Muggle Studies was useless to Harry, who had grown up as one, but Arithmancy and Ancient Runes looked promising. Hermione always went off about those subjects, so they couldn't be too dull.

Harry didn't expect to master every one of these subjects, but the books would be good to have on hand, and Harry continued in his shopping.

A large section of the shop was dedicated to wizarding laws and history, neither of which Harry had much interest for. The rest of the bookshop, about half the shop's total size, was divided by subject, and Harry perused each section meticulously.

In the Healing Arts section, Harry picked out two books that taught self applied healing charms. With all the times he'd been in the Hospital Wing, Harry thought that being able to heal a small cut or a few bruises would be a worthy investment. With study, and opportunity, he'd even be able to set simple bone fractures. Harry promised himself to look up how Lockhart screwed up so royally.

In the Potions section, Harry picked out three large texts. The first was a guideline of basic potion principles; what ingredients shouldn't be added together, what properties each ingredients have, and so on. Harry thought that Snape would have taught him all of this long ago, but Harry then remembered Snape didn't really teach. He just pointed to the board, yelled "Follow the recipe," and then spent an hour hovering over his students. Harry never had a good understanding of the basics, and that's where many of his problems came from. The second book was "Healing and Household Potions," and Harry thought he could pick up a few pointers from there. He'd be able to brew his own dreamless sleep potions, or any of the other vile concoctions Madam Pomfrey forced down his throat so often. Maybe they could even be improved upon, in taste at least. The last book was a personal interest of Harry's. A dusty old tome entitled "Rare and Powerful Potions." Harry had no illusions about being able to brew the majority of these recipes, but maybe one day he could. It was the title that had caught Harry's eye, but the reason he decided to keep it was because he flipped past a section describing the

Wolfsbane Potion that Remus required. He knew it was one of the most difficult potions to make, but Harry was interested in the ingredients and recipe. "Maybe Hermione would like a stab at this?" Harry asked himself.

In the Transfiguration section, Harry left most of the books alone, except for the ones dealing with Animagi. Since discovering his father was one, Harry had planned on one day reading up on the subject, and even attempting it. Plus, it was just cool. Harry popped another three books into basket, "Theory of the Animagi," "The Animal Within," and "How to Become an Animagus to Impress your Transfiguration Teacher." Harry laughed at that last title. McGonagall would have his head on a spike in true Scottish fashion if she found out Harry was trying to become an animagus illegally. With one last book in the basket, about transfiguring objects to decorate homes Harry moved on.

The Charms section had a lot of smaller, more specialized books than what Harry had seen so far. He did pick up a few that interested him, and some that he thought he might need. Five books from this section joined the others. The first was about animating household appliances. The second discussed in depth the different types of wards, and how to cast and detect them. A third book was about charms and spells to magically alter space. After hearing about the miracles Lemarin had performed on his new trunk, Harry wanted to be able to try and do some of that. Book four was entitled "Year Eight Advanced Charms," and Harry read in the author's explanation that this book contained the advanced spells that would be taught if magical educations were extended a year. Harry thought it was strange title, but he got the author's point; advanced charms not taught at Hogwarts. And the last book, and one Harry had paused on, was entitled "Mastering the Fidelius Charm." The charm that resulted in the death of his parents. Little did Harry know, it would also be one of the first spells he would seriously study.

Harry almost skipped over the Herbology section entirely. It wasn't a favorite subject of his; he'd just picked up the textbooks to cover the basics. Besides, Harry doubted having a green thumb would help him defeat Voldemort. But that did bring Harry to think about Neville, and how well he had held up during the fight in the Ministry last week. Of

all his friends, Neville had fought back the best, even with a broken nose and snapped wand. Harry grabbed one book for Neville, "Careers for the Botanically Gifted."

The next section Harry visited was Defense, and Harry selected the most books from this one. "An Auror's Handbook" described an auror's advanced training program, and listed some of the more powerful, but non lethal spells. "Magical Bonds and Restraints" discussed all of the methods for restraining a person, and instructed about instances like when metal shackles would prove advantageous over using conjured ropes. Thinking back to the DoM, and how Harry and his friends had stunned a Death Eater, only to have him be revived by another, Harry thought it would be a good idea to be able to more securely disable an opponent. There was a small addendum in the back that caught his eye, which reminded readers not to use these spells "while pursuing friendly relations." Harry blushed as it went into further detail on restraining spells that were appropriate in these situations.

"Dark Art Detection Spells" was pretty self explanatory, and "Disabling Dirty Wizards" seemed to focus on fighting those who don't fight fair. It also had a section on fighting multiple opponents, which Harry thought might be useful. Although it sickened Harry, he also picked up a brand new copy of "The Complete History of You-Know-Who's First Rise to Power," written by an unnamed author. The book must have just come out to be labeled "first rise," but Harry wasn't surprised. Harry didn't know if the book would help much, and Merlin knows he already knew how it ended, but he thought that reading about Voldemort's earlier campaign might prove insightful. "432 Counter-Curses to 376 Painful Curses that Hurt Like the Dickens" proved to be an interesting buy. Harry didn't know if the author miscounted, or if there were multiple counter-curses in certain circumstances, but Harry was sure to come up against some of those. The counter-curses would prove useful, and Harry had every intention of studying the original curses as well. Those practice dummies would come in handy.

The last book from the Defense section Harry almost passed by, because the title sounded like something Professor Binns would drone on about. "A History of Defense," sounded boring, and was

quite old, but after looking through it, Harry thought it might be the most valuable book in the collection. Apparently it was written long before the dark arts were separated from Hogwart's curriculum, because only a few spells listed seemed familiar to Harry. Some of them were downright nasty, and would clearly be painful. The defensive spells were listed chronologically by when they were developed, and Harry supposed that's the only reason the book fit its title. If he were at school, this book most positively would be in the restricted section. The only reason it wasn't a dark arts book was because a small description about the spell histories were included with each entry. Most people probably mistook it for a History book.

The few remaining sections Harry passed by quickly. He grabbed a few new ones, but in no specific order. One instructed how to conjure and cook food. Another was a book of advanced Occlumency practices. Advanced Legilimency was considered a dark art, so Harry could only find an elementary book about that. He figured it would help in locking people out of his head if he knew how they got in, in the first place. Another three books for recreation, and Harry was ready to check out. He'd spent over two hours in the bookstore, and Harry still had two more stops to go to before dark.

At the register, Harry paid for his fifty two books (twenty five textbooks, twenty seven others) rather quickly. He had expected to be asked bothersome questions about some of his purchases, but the shopkeeper didn't inquire. The only question she did ask was, "Why so many books?"

Harry had beforehand prepared an elaborate story, but kept the answer simple. "My brother's a first year, and accidentally blew up the family library. My mom asked me to replace some titles."

That was it, and five minutes later, and almost three hundred and sixty galleons poorer, Harry dumped the books into his trunk's first compartment, and was out the door.

Right next door was Madame Malkin's robe shop, and Harry's next stop. Like he'd done with Tom, Harry knew he couldn't get by being measured for robes going unnoticed, so he approached the counter looking for Madame Malkin. She must have not been working that

day, because the only two attendants were an older looking witch, and an attractive girl who couldn't be much older than Harry. Being a teenage boy, Harry approached the young girl for help. He also thought that she might remember him if she had attended Hogwarts, and that the older lady looked a lot like his aunt did. Harry didn't want to risk the old witch if she gossiped like his Aunt Petunia.

"Excuse me," Harry directed to the young lady, "I need some assistance. Could we possibly step into a private room so I can be measured. I'm a little shy."

The girl giggled and said, "Of course!" She then followed Harry towards the back and led him into a large dressing room.

Harry made the girl promise to not scream out, and then removed his sunglasses and ski cap to the young girl's astonishment. She immediately began blushing and rambling on about how it was such an honor to meet him, etc. It turned out she hadn't attended Hogwarts, but an American school instead. She had just moved back to England. Apparently though, she was a fan of Harry's, and turned red as she went on about how excited she was at meeting him. Harry had heard it all before and politely quieted the girl, revealing he was laying low by shopping in disguise, and he asked for her help. He wanted to buy some new robes of the best material Madame Malkin's provided. Five would be everyday, black robes that were allowable for school. Two would be training robes, suitable for potion making or physical exercise. Three would be for everyday use that he could wear into Hogsmeade if he liked. And the last would be a dress robe, just in case he might need one this year.

The girls nodded an agreement, and began to take Harry's measurements while giggling. When it was time to measure Harry's inseam, they both turned beat red, but wisely said nothing. Harry explained that he couldn't wait for the robes to be altered, but would pick them up early the next day, and the girl left to bring back some samples.

The five black robes were easy enough to decide, as they had to match Hogwarts' uniform standards. The material Harry chose was a little more decadent than he was used to, but felt nice against his skin.

It was a textured heavy material, maybe linen, and it breathed real well. It has a slight gloss to it, but nothing too shiny.

The three everyday robes, Harry had wanted in navy blue, dark green, and maybe maroon. Years of wearing Dudley's drab cast offs led Harry to gravitate towards darker colors. But the girl convinced Harry to look at a few brighter selections, and who was he to argue with such an attractive professional? He finally decided on an emerald green to match his eyes (according to the girl the combination was striking), the navy blue he wanted, and a bright red crimson with gold trim, to match Gryffindor's colors.

The two work robes were the simplest to design, and could have actually been ready by the time Harry left. They were a medium grey, and made of a heavy material. Not as comfortable or as smooth as the fabrics of his other robes, but a lot more sturdy. If Harry was going to be training and sloshing around with experimental potions, they would work.

Harry hadn't bought a dress robe since fourth year, and had outgrown that one awhile ago. And even though Harry had no plans for formal wear, he decided he needed a replacement. The young assistant seemed to show Harry an endless supply of fabrics and robes, and some she dismissed before he even got a say. 'Girls do love their shopping!' Harry thought. He just sat back and let the young girl, named Amber, match each material to his complexion or hair color. She finally convinced Harry to buy not one, but two dress robes, as she couldn't decide between her two favorite fabrics. He initially spoke to oppose her, but gave in when he saw her two choices.

The first was a metallic looking charcoal grey, with gold piping around the edges. It felt like raw silk, but according to Amber wasn't. It was a very simple and elegant looking, and Harry didn't feel like he was showing off while wearing them. The grey matched his watch face which Harry liked, and the gold trim matched his jewelry.

The second choice was mostly made from the same material, the color pitch black. Unlike his school robes, this one was quite a bit fancy, and seemed to capture all available light, while still throwing off a golden glow. As Amber moved the robe under the store's candle

light, it almost looked like a muggle mylar balloon. The golden-black robes were trimmed in a pearly white, and there was a pattern embroidered across the robe's shoulders. A magnificent blazing white phoenix; with gold and crimson accents along the creature's feathers. Harry didn't think a phoenix could be more beautiful than Dumbledore's, but the one stitched on his new robe put Fawkes to shame.

Amber began tallying the totals for Harry, and convinced him to throw in four new cloaks to go with his new robes. One heavy winter cloak, and three normal weight cloaks in colors that matched his everyday robes. Amber said they could also be worn with his black robes, so Harry stopped at just the four. Harry got dressed back into his muggle clothes as he went over details of his final purchase with the girl. He'd be back tomorrow afternoon to pick up the large order.

"The clothes won't be ready until at least three pm," said Amber, "because of all the charms you decided to add." Harry had opted for a few extras to be placed on all his robes. They would now be stain repellent and charmed to fit him if he grew or gained any weight; up to six inches and thirty pounds. The two work robes would have a built in cooling charm, and all four cloaks would be moisture and fireproof.

With a thanks, Harry stepped out of the dressing room after giving Amber a kiss on the cheek. Her eyes boggled out, and she blushed a deep red. Harry was feeling a bit embarrassed too. He hadn't thought much of kissing the girl, it just sort of happened. After all, he'd spent the best part of an hour in a pair of boxers in her witness, and he felt comfortable with her. She mumbled a welcome and Harry ran for the door.

Hedwig was perched on the roof across the street, but had learned by now not to fly down to Harry's shoulder, because he would just enter another store any second. And that's exactly what he did. The last store in Diagon Alley he needed was right besides Madame Malkin's, and it made sense because it too was another clothing store, sort of.

There was no name above the door, but Harry had been in here before to buy his dragon hide gloves for school. The shop seemed to

specialize in animal hides, both of normal and magical animals. Harry came here to buy a wand holster and some boots, but planned on looking around as well.

Dragon hide boots were very fashionable in the wizarding world, but very expensive as well. That's because not only do they look good, but the hide reflects most common spells and curses. Not to mention, dragon hide doesn't exactly grow on trees.

"Can I help you?" Harry was startled by the voice, because he couldn't see anyone in the entire shop.

"Hello? Who's there?" Harry had learned his lesson about staying on guard, and his hand gripped his wand through his pocket.

"Sorry about that, didn't mean to upset you." A young man, maybe in his early thirties, appeared behind him from under what Harry recognized as an invisibility cloak. His own at the moment was packed into his miniaturized trunk. "I was just examining this cloak. A client of mine has started production of invisibility cloaks, and I was testing it out so to speak."

"Whoa," said Harry, "they're really rare." Harry hadn't realized he had repeated Ron's exact comment verbatim, but he continued. "Out of curiosity, how much would something like that cost?"

"Well, this one's not for sale yet. My client happened to come across a herd of Demiguises, and managed to capture a few before they escaped. As you know, Demiguises aren't protected because they're not endangered. They're still most difficult to capture though, because, well, they're invisible. This is my client's personal cloak; he hasn't gone into production yet. But a standard invisibility cloak, depending on its size and quality, can run from two to six thousand galleons."

"That's a lot of money," Harry commented. He had no idea that they were that expensive. And to think, he treated his like an old blanket.

"Yes," the shopkeeper replied, "it certainly is. Is this what you're interested in, or can I help you with something else?"

"Er, no. I don't think I could afford a cloak like that right now," Harry lied. "I'm actually looking for some boots, and a wand holster. I seem to attract a lot of trouble, and I know that dragon hide boots repel spells."

"Yes, certainly. But don't be confused. Unlike real dragons, clothes made from their hides aren't completely spell proof. Their hide seems to lose some of its magical properties once removed from a dragon's body. For instance, dragon hide boots will protect you from a jelly-legs curse or a leg bind spell, but will only partially protect you from a full body bind. If a spell's aimed at your head or chest, the boots won't have any effect at all." The man certainly knew his footwear. "But if it's magical protection you're after, there are other choices."

"Like what?" Harry asked. "I need all the protection I can get." Harry had totally given up hiding his identity.

"Well, there are a few options. Magical talismans provide some protection. Almost any article of clothing can be charmed to protect as well, to a degree. There are also other clothing options made of dragon hide, not just boots. We carry vests, pants, cloaks, and even hats all made from dragon hide. They're all quite heavy, and some most uncomfortable, but they're all effective. There are also selections of potions that can be ingested for immunity to certain spells, but those come at great cost. Usually some sort of personal sacrifice must be made."

"What kind of sacrifice?" Harry wouldn't dismiss anything right away if it could help protect him.

"Nothing too pleasant I'm afraid. Sometimes it's the ability to have children. Or maybe one of the five senses, sight or smell perhaps. Some strong potions provide a great deal of protection, at the cost of giving up part of one's magical powers." The shopkeeper grimaced as he spoke. "The potions I speak of aren't really dark arts, but they're close. It's only because they're used on one's self that they're still legal. Forcing another to drink these potions is punishable by up to forty years in Azkaban. I would suggest you stay away from those potions."

Harry agreed completely. While he'd love to have increased protection, or immunity to some spells, Harry wasn't about to give up his magic or hearing for that chance. "Look," Harry informed the man. It was his last stop in Diagon Alley for the day, so Harry didn't think it would hurt to give away his identity, "the truth is I'm Harry Potter." He removed his sunglasses and cap. "Voldemort's trying to kill me, along with about twenty Death Eaters, and I need everything I can get my hands on. Any suggestions?"

The shopkeeper handled Harry's revelation better than anyone else that day. He didn't faint, blush, or gasp. He did flinch at Voldemort's name, but everyone did that.

"Well, this certainly is a surprise." The man stated the obvious. "Yes, I can see now why you're so interested. I think we can come up with a few options for you."

In the end, they decided together on a full set of dragon hide clothes, minus the hat. Boots were the obvious choice, and Harry already knew what they did. He got a pair of pants as well, which looked almost like leather pants, that Harry thought were most unpleasant feeling. The shopkeeper, Mr. Anjay, told Harry that they would eventually stretch and fit, becoming more comfortable. But Harry would have to suffer through the discomfort until they did.

A vest followed the pair of pants, but not a vest as Harry thought of it. It was meant to be worn inside of a shirt, against the skin. It was a bit large in some places, a bit tight in others. Mr. Anjay instructed Harry that dragon hide was most effective when worn close to the body, hence the tight pants. The vest too would stretch to fit after about two weeks of constant use.

Harry passed on the hat, as he'd always thought wizard hats looked stupid, whether they had a dead vulture on them or not. He wanted to pass on the dragon hide cloak as well, because it was so heavy, but Mr. Anjay informed Harry it was part of a complete set, and couldn't be left out. Harry thought that sounded suspicious, he had passed on the hat after all, but said nothing. The cloak added another layer of protection, and Harry would just leave it in his trunk until he really thought that he needed it.

There were two dragon hide sets in Harry's size, and he chose the black over the red. It was a bit stiffer and rough, but more sturdy as well. It made sense once Mr. Anjay informed him the black set came from a Hungarian Horntail, and the red a Chinese Fireball. Everyone knew Horntails were more spell resistant than Fireballs. Of the four dragons Harry had seen at the Tri-Wizard tournament, his was the most dangerous one there. Harry wasn't too sure about being so close to a Horntail so soon after the first task, but swallowed his discomfort.

The final piece of the set was a wand holder, or rather wand holders; there were two. One strapped onto his inside forearm, and he could draw his wand at a snap of his wrist. It would take practice to catch the wand just right, but with time, it was the fastest draw possible. Incidentally, auror's used the same kind. The second holster could be strapped to a belt or kept inside a boot. It was a simpler design, made for wizards without much coordination. "If I ever manage to get a second wand, I'll keep in it my boot," Harry decided. Both holsters protected the wand from being summoned, and Harry couldn't be disarmed either as long as the wand was in the holster.

Harry packed the dragon hide clothes away into his magic trunk, as Mr. Anjay decided on a price. Harry didn't know if his luck with discounts would hold up, but decided he didn't care. Anjay seemed like a serious, straight to business kind of person.

"Mr. Potter, have you had any thoughts about carrying anything other than a wand?" Anjay surprised Harry with the question. Harry already had his money pouch out and was ready to pay.

"What do you mean?" Harry had no clue what Mr. Anjay was talking about.

"I mean personal protection," he replied.

Harry's first thought was about the strained talks he got from his teachers at primary school about safe sex. Mr. Anjay wasn't talking about condoms was he? "Oh god!" Harry thought. "Please don't let this guy be coming on to me!"

Anjay sensed Harry discomfort and dismissed his fears with a laugh. "No, not anything like that. I mean, something in the form of a knife, or sword perhaps. It's an old wizard custom to have a blade of some kind, in case one loses his wand. Nowadays they're mostly decorative, but a few pureblood wizards still carry around a sword. I think it would be a good idea for you. Not only is it legal to carry a blade, but you'd have means to defend yourself without using magic. Underage wizards may not be legally allowed to use a wand, but that's where the laws stop. It says nothing about using other weapons."

Harry thought about it, and liked the idea. Harry had always had a small pocket knife attached to his keychain at Privet Drive, and wasn't too afraid of the concept of carrying around a knife. And although Harry wasn't worried about underage restrictions on magic, it could prove useful. "Do you carry anything like that here?"

"Yes, please follow me." Mr. Anjay led Harry to a side doorway, and through the curtain that hung from it. Inside, the walls were mounted with all types of swords, daggers, and other throwing knives. "The fact I carry weapons isn't a secret if you're wondering, it's just that their presence make some of my other customers rather nervous." Harry had to agree. He couldn't imagine many parents shopping with their kids in a shop adorned with enough weapons to behead the entire city, twice over.

"I have a few ordinary weapons, but mostly carry enchanted blades. For you, I would suggest as big a blade as possible, while still being discrete. Perhaps a knife in the boot, or a dagger strapped to your other forearm?"

Harry liked that last choice, and let Anjay know. He was already wearing his new wand holster on his right forearm, and it made his arms feel unbalanced. Harry also asked about some of the different powers the blades had. Harry didn't want anything poisonous that he might accidentally hurt himself with.

"Well, we don't carry poisoned blades if that's what you're worrying about." Mr. Anjay was uncanny in how well he was predicting Harry's

concerns. "Most of my blades are spelled to keep their original sharpness, or to alarm if in the hands of a small child. I do carry a few with a bit more seriousness to them, but not many."

Harry reminded Mr. Anjay who he was fighting, and asked to see a collection of daggers. Some of the ones Anjay showed him seemed silly. One had an ice like blade, another one was iron hot. Harry supposed either would be painful, but how could he carry something like that on his arm without hurting himself? Another choice caused high fever when it drew blood, but that only took effect after a few hours. It did occur to Harry that he had access to a small armory of his own within his family's vault, but Harry didn't have the time to research all of their magical properties. He'd get a chance to in the future, but decided to make at least one purchase from Mr. Anjay.

There were a few more that Harry didn't like, and a few that he did. But when Anjay showed Harry another one and explained what it did, Harry knew that's the one he wanted.

The dagger had a standard looking steel blade, with a rubberized grip. It wasn't decoratively made of gold or bronze like some of the other's Harry had seen, and it wasn't too old looking either. But it was made with one clear intention in mind; to cut. The five inch long blade had an infinite sharpness charm on it, and was shatterproof. Anjay showed Harry just how sharp the blade was. From across the room, Anjay threw apples at the blade in Harry's hand, and they sliced cleanly in two, without any effort from Harry. The handle fit comfortably in his hand, and the rubber provided a non-slip surface. But the best feature, however, was the properties imbued within the metal of the blade. Unlike most blades, Anjay explained, this wasn't a muggle dagger that later got charmed. Instead, it was magically made. And while it was possible to add additional charms, the very metal itself held its own magic. This particular dagger was imbued with properties against magical healing. "Which means," Mr. Anjay explained, "that any cut you make with this blade has to heal the muggle way, and will probably leave a scar. Any attempt to heal the wound with spells or potions won't work, and may even cause worse damage."

Harry immediately thought of Wormtail's silver hand, and the thought crossed his mind of how he'd like to remove it. This blade would be perfect. "I'll take it!"

Ten minutes later, Harry had the blade packed into his trunk, with a sheath Anjay had found that fit. It wasn't dragon hide, but was a very study brown leather. This way, Harry could snap out his wand with his right hand, or reach across to his left and draw out the dagger. It was a new feeling for Harry, much different than owning a small penknife, but the dagger gave Harry a feeling of security. The dragon hide clothes and dagger together were very expensive, but Harry paid happily. Mr. Anjay wished him well in his fight, and Harry left the store.

Hedwig had moved a bit closer then the roof across the street, and was now perched on a trash bin outside Madame Malkin's robe shop. The sun was just setting behind the tall buildings of Diagon Alley, and Harry had to remove his sunglasses to be able to see. "Just one more stop Hedwig!" Harry called out. "Just one more, and then on to Knockturn Alley!"

AUTHOR NOTES:

Thank you to everyone who has read, and more to those who review. If you don't mind, please mention your age and sex when you review. I want to see who my demographic is, so I can either add a few more things that people will like, or try to rope in some other readers. I hope I didn't go too overboard with this chapter. Reading it over after I've written it, I do think Harry's getting way too much stuff at once, but I'm having too much fun to change it. Don't worry though, Harry still has to learn to use everything; it won't just come naturally to him. And no mysterious figures will be training Harry in his dreams either. The next chapter will be much like this one, with a very unexpected dark twist. Hope you enjoy! Oh, and for those of you wondering, I guess the exchange rate at about 1Galleon equals 4 Pounds equals 6 US Dollars.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected al that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to,

besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 5 – A Death in Knockturn Alley

As Harry walked away from animal hide store, he reflected back on his extremely long day. He'd been up for almost twelve hours now, and was constantly hiding, lying, and worrying about giving away his presence. Harry decided he didn't much like being CONSTANTLY VIGILANT, and knew he would need a rest soon.

He had plans to go into Knockturn Alley, and thought about putting those off until tomorrow, but Harry thought that might be too risky. If even one person who had recognized him that day had spread word, there would certainly be a few Death Eaters lurking about tomorrow, not too mention Order members. He would have to make a quick stop to pick up his new robes, but couldn't afford another day of leisurely window shopping. As much as Harry wanted to crawl into bed and assimilate all that had happened to him that day, he knew he had to wait a few more hours.

Harry easily found the eyeglass shop that Cho's mother had talked about, and knew why he had passed it all day long without seeing it. Although Mrs. Chang had said it was in Diagon Alley, and Harry supposed the actual building was, the entrance way faced Knockturn Alley. After a quick look around, Harry made a bee line for the door. Hedwig almost fell off his shoulder before catching some air, and flew ahead to rest on a nearby awning. She hooted her disapproval at Harry for entering the dark alley, but Harry was inside before she had much say.

The store itself was much brighter and cleaner than the outside appearance led Harry to believe. All the merchandise was neatly displayed on wall-mounted racks, and Harry gaped as he took inventory of the magical replacement parts in front of him. He was told to expect eyeglasses and hearing aids, and a few other prosthetics, but there was virtually a replacement item for every part of the body you could think of. Harry recognized a whole section that appeared to be dedicated exclusively to Mad-Eye. The shop was filed to the brim with magical eyes, false legs, what Harry assumed were voice boxes, and even what he recognized as female enhancement parts. Harry blushed as he thought about whether these parts might

feel more life-like than their muggle, saline counterparts. Not that Harry would know.

A kind looking woman was reading a copy of Witch Weekly and looked up as Harry approached the counter. "Hello there, how can I....Oh my God!....You're Harry Potter!"

Harry had already given up on his disguise. It was too dark for his sunglasses, and he couldn't well hide under his cloak's hood if he was to be fitted with glasses.

"Yes, sorry to startle you," he said, "but I was interested in some glasses and was told this is the place to go. I'm sort of treating myself today, and thought I'd replace my muggle ones. Any ideas?"

It took her a moment to calm herself, and Harry had to repeat his question, but the woman finally replied.

There appeared to be two types of magical corrective lenses. The first choice was a normal muggle frame, which were then layered with a selection of charms the buyer chose. Each charm added was an additional charge, and the shop offered a wide selection of options. The normal indestructible and weatherproof spells Harry already knew about. But there were also lesser known charms to change eye color, let the owner see better in the dark, change the color of the frames to match fashionable outfits, and even one to make the eyes give off a sparkling appearance. Harry didn't see the point of that last charm, but thought someone as shallow as Lavender Brown might be impressed by it.

The second option offered didn't differ much from the first. The charm selections were the same, which were also layered on for the same prices. The only difference was that these were magical lenses, not ordinary muggle ones. They sounded more like what Harry knew of as contact lenses. Once you put the glasses on, the lenses would begin to melt, and "fuse" to the owner's eyeballs. Harry cringed at the thought, and the shopkeeper agreed that it did hurt, but only for a moment. "It feels like a hot poker to the eye I'm told," she described, "except the pain only lasts about two seconds then stops completely. The glasses can also be taken off with a voice command, but that

hurts just the same, so most people just leave them in for good. But many say it's well worth the pain, because you'll never have to clean or worry about them ever again."

It's not that Harry was a stranger to pain, but he was nervous about voluntarily going through it. However, he weighed the advantages the contact lenses would offer, and decided on them. His glasses had a tendency to slip during Quidditch, and Harry had plans to do some serious fighting in the upcoming months. Besides, although they never admit it, all people who wear glasses would give them up in a heartbeat if they could.

He informed the witch about his decision, and signed up for most of the options. Being able to change eye colors would be very useful, and the unbreakable and weatherproofing charms convenient. The eye color charm worked, the witch explained, by pressing your fingers against your closed eyelids, and speaking the color you wanted them to change to. They were pressure and voice activated, and would return to their original color with a command of "return". The only charm he left out was the "sparkle eye" option as he called it, as he had no plans for wooing Lavender this year.

As the witch pulled out a blank pair of lenses to begin the spell work, Harry for the millionth time that day got an odd look and long pause.

"Was there something else you needed to know?" Harry asked. She had already tested his prescription using an incantation he hadn't heard, and Harry didn't know what she was waiting for.

"Not really," she replied, "I was just wondering if you'd like an advanced option? It's normally not legal for those outside of the Hit Wizard department, but I've read about so many of your acclaims, I think it might help."

Harry was confused about what acclaims she was talking about, then glanced back at the Witch Weekly article she'd been reading earlier. Harry had known he'd been a regular fixture in the magazine since he started Hogwarts, and they seemed to romantically match him up with a different witch each week! He didn't know what advanced option she might offer that had anything to do with dating, but the mention of

Hit Wizards stopped his comments. Those were the Ministry's most honored auror's, who specialized in seeking out and destroying dark creatures and wizards. "What's the option?"

"Well, I'm supposed to have written permission from the Ministry to use it, but the same charms and spells that are used to create advanced model magic eyeballs can be applied to lenses. I've read you're familiar with the retired auror Alastor Moody? Well, what he's got is an early version of what I'm talking about. Not many opt for the spells though, because they can be a bit distracting for the first few days. I'm not sure if you're aware, but advanced model magic eyes can see through virtually any surface, up to about one hundred feet. If you'd like to have the charms added, I wouldn't mind keeping quiet about them for you." The witch certainly was helpful, and Harry thought about all the use he could get out of a magical eye like Moody's. He'd never have to worry about someone sneaking up on him ever again. However, if his eyesight was affected for the first few days, not letting him see properly, Harry might die before he got the chance to properly use it.

Harry thought about it for a few moments, and then had an idea. "Does the charm have to be applied to both lenses, or can it be used for just one?"

"Oh no, Mr. Potter!" Did he ask a stupid question? "I would only use it on one lens regardless; otherwise you'd never be able to see properly. You see, once the charmed lens is in your eye, it will only be able to see magically. That's why we leave one eye alone; to allow proper vision. If you want to take advantage of the magical lens, just cover the other eye with you hand, or close your eye. You'll only have to do that just at first. Once you get used to seeing with the magical lens, you'll be able to switch back and forth between the two visions by will. Your brain will get used to the two different signals, and you'll be able to consciously switch back and forth, even with both eyes open. It's confusing the first few days, and you might have a headache, but it will all pass with time."

Sounded good to Harry, but he had one last question. "Is it permanent? Or can I take the eyepiece out if I don't like it?"

"It works the same way all magical glasses do, they can be removed." The witch reminded Harry. "But remember, there's pain on removal as well. And I think there'll be another few days of headaches and dizziness as your brain gets used to only one signal again."

So of course, if only for the reason that it was more expensive, Harry opted for the special treatments. If it was reversible, he'd give it a try. And if Harry didn't like it, no harm done.

Harry decided to wait for the glasses to be made, and watched carefully as the witch performed each layer of charms. It seemed each layer heated the special lenses, so she had to wait about two minutes between each layer for them to cool down. They killed time by exchanging some light conversation. She asked Harry about the scores of rumors she'd heard about (most untrue), and he asked the shopkeeper about some of the less identifiable pieces on display. About halfway through the charms she did slip a piece of news that surprised Harry.

"Been working in this shop for near twelve years now, and I never thought Harry Potter would walk through my doors."

Harry could've sworn Cho's mother had said the shop only opened last year, and asked the witch about it. It turned out; she'd only moved locations after saving her galleons over the years. What she said next surprised Harry even more. "Yes, the original shop was buried way back in Knockturn Alley, and the clientele wasn't too nice."

This surprised Harry because in no way did this shop seem to be involved with any type of dark arts, and he'd always been told that Knockturn Alley only catered to dark magic. But when he confronted the witch, she just laughed.

"No, no, funny you think that though. It's a common misconception, and parents like to scare their kids with horror stories, but not all shops in there are bad. It's just that a store like mine doesn't get the business that Madame Malkin gets, or any other of those stores in Diagon Alley. We couldn't nearly afford the rent! Most of the shops in Knockturn Alley aren't dark; they're just small, specialized stores that most people don't have the need for. Even the shops known for dark

arts stuff don't openly display it; it's not legal. No, most of their stuff is questionable at best."

Harry thought about her answer as she went ahead and completed the lenses. It made sense, he supposed. After all, the wizarding world would hardly allow an entire street of dark art businesses to operate; and in the capital city no less. He'd been foolish to think like such a child. At least now Harry had felt better about his evening activities.

Soon the lenses were complete, and he made to put them on as he braced himself for the pain. It did hurt, and felt just like what Harry imagined a hot poker would be like, then it all stopped, and there wasn't even a hint of discomfort. The pain had been so quick, Harry hadn't even time to scream. Still, it wasn't something he was anxious to repeat again.

"I suggest you keep both eyes open for the first few hours, till your eyes get used to the new lenses. Then you can practice, and dare I say abuse your new toy all you like. Just don't come back here looking at me; I wear my robes for a reason!"

He didn't know what her statement meant until it dawned on Harry a few moments later. He could see through robes! Harry had never thought about using the magical lens like that; he'd been more concerned about security earlier on. But if he could see through robes, well then, 'Wow....I can check out every girl at Hogwarts if I want. And nobody will know!' Harry had this and a few more even nastier thoughts.

He must have been smirking though, because the old woman snapped at him as Harry paid and made his way to the door. "Remember son, don't go abusing that gift. I didn't give you a magic lens to go looking at girls' knickers! Use it well, and be careful." She paused, and then added. "And don't take what I said about Knockturn Alley too seriously. At night it's still a very dangerous place! If you're thinking about exploring, wait for the daytime!"

Harry thanked the lady once more, and was on his way. Although it was just past sunset, and there was a slight glow in the sky still, Harry did notice he could see remarkably well with his new lenses' night

vision enhancement. It wasn't like anything out of a muggle spy film, and Harry couldn't see perfectly in the dark, it just increased the light levels slightly. Harry was also tempted to shut his right eye immediately to test his x-ray vision, but resisted the impulse at the woman's warnings. Harry could wait a few hours.

Hedwig wasn't noticing Harry apparently, because although she did follow behind him, she wouldn't look at him. Harry figured she must have still been upset at him for entering Knockturn Alley. And with that thought, he set off into the dark alleyway.

It seemed the lady was right. Although the people wondering the street weren't the most upstanding citizens (Harry even thought he saw a few hags), the shops he happened by didn't seem as evil as he thought they'd be. There was another Apothecary he passed, a pet shop that dealt in spiders and snakes, and a curiosity shop that had wizard artifacts from around the world. One of the largest stores he'd seen so far was Borgin & Burkes, and Harry remembered that one well. In his second year, Harry had his first bad experience with floo powder, and ended up there by accident instead of the Leaky Cauldron. Harry knew that the shop sold dark artifacts, because he'd overheard Lucius Malfoy doing business there. So that's why Harry decided to stop in there first.

It was just like he remembered. Dark and dank, filled with shadows and a musty smell. The shop needed a good dusting. There were a few bookshelves along one wall, glass cabinets around the others housing shrunken heads and other creepy things, and the empty black cabinet Harry had hid in was still there as well. There was no attendant in the store presently, so Harry began to browse the bookshelves.

A few titles were copies of books he'd seen earlier in Flourish & Blotts, but not many. There were only a few that interested Harry. "The Theory of Magic" looked to be a boring read, but promised that by having a better understanding of magical theory, complex spells would be easier to learn. "Apparition Adventures" was a book he wouldn't normally be allowed to buy until he was of age. 'In this shop,' Harry decided, 'I don't think that will be a problem.'

The text explained the basic rules of apparition, showed an easy fifteen step process to learn how, and gave graphic details on some of history's greatest blunders (complete with color photos of some nasty splinches). It was more a guide on what not to do than an actual instruction manual, but Harry thought he could learn from it.

The last book Harry placed in his small book pile was "The Revised 184th Edition Floo Network Directory". Harry wasn't a big fan of floo travel, but thought it a good idea to have a list of wizard destinations. The book also explained how to attach and remove fireplaces to the floo network, which could come in handy.

The other books weren't to Harry's liking, and he went to turn around to look for a shopkeeper, when he spied the man behind the counter staring at him. Harry turned back to the bookshelves quickly, taken by surprise by the man. He must have entered the shop very quietly, almost as if he was spying on Harry. He was about to turn around again to address the man, when Harry remembered he wasn't in disguise anymore. He still had on his ski cap and hood, but the sunglasses were in his tiny trunk, and his green eyes were clearly prominent.

So Harry decided to test out his new magical lenses. He set the books he was holding aside, pressed his fingers to his eyelids, and ordered them to turn brown. Harry decided that this would be the most usual color, and wouldn't draw as much attention as blue or grey eyes.

He picked back up his selected texts, and approached the man behind the counter. "I wish to purchase these, as well as a few additional things. I was told by a friend that you had a private collection I might look at?"

The man gazed at Harry suspiciously, almost as if he himself had a magical eye to look through Harry's disguise. "Who told you I have a private collection? Those books," he gestured to the back wall, "are the only ones I got."

Harry had expected the man, who he now realized was the same one from four years ago, to be wary of him. That's why he'd practiced a

cover story earlier. Of all the lies and half truths he'd been telling all day long, this lie would be the most important to Harry.

"My friend's father, a Mr. Lucius Malfoy, told me I might be pleased with some of the more rare selections in your shop. I don't see anything here, and he did hint that you might only do business with a select clientele. I can assure you, I'd be willing to pay more than a fair price for whatever I find I like."

The man's eyes widened at Malfoy's name. No doubt he remembered the man's expensive tastes. But he didn't give in just yet. "If you know Lucius Malfoy, then tell me why I haven't been seeing him around town lately."

It was a test he supposed. Harry had no doubt that some of the darker wizards in society knew that Lucius Malfoy had been captured by the Ministry. The Daily Prophet however had withheld names of the captured Death Easters until a trial could be held, so the public at large had no idea who they were.

"Let's just say," Harry responded, "that Mr. Malfoy was a bit careless in his recent actions, and will be laying low for awhile. It does all sound a bit mysterious, but I'd expect to see him shortly." With the not too subtle hint about the Department of Mysteries, the man smiled and lifted the countertop.

"I'd have to agree with your assessment, sir. I do happen to have a rare collection in the back, right this way." The man locked the front door with a spell, and led Harry to the back room that was even darker and dustier than the front one. The man, who introduced himself as Bartemus Burkes, muttered a spell to light a nearby torch. The back room was filled with moldy boxes and crates, and had a small desk in the middle of the room. Burkes approached the desk, placed his wand against the front drawer, and said something Harry couldn't understand. Then the desk seemed to vanish, and in its place was a trapdoor on the floor.

Burkes lifted the trapdoor open, and climbed down a short ladder into the room below. He motioned for Harry to follow, and Harry did. Once down Harry looked around, and found himself in a dark chamber the

size of the front and back rooms together. It was crammed with books and relics, from floor to ceiling. There were even a few knives like in Mr. Anjay's shop, but these blades seemed to glow with a frightening red light. "Well then," Burkes informed Harry, "welcome to my collection of rare antiquities. Is there something in particular you're after? Perhaps I can help?"

Harry thought about how to carefully word his reply. Then he began. "Well, I'll be looking at the books you have. But I'm also interested in something else. I'll be moving to another country soon, and will want to be able to use magic without the ministry knowing about it, strictly for defense of course. My new home doesn't have the same laws we do here, and I want to be able to practice freely before I move. I was led to believe I might find an answer to my problems at your shop."

"Yes, I think I might have something that can help. You're still a student then?" The man seemed to know what he was talking about.

"Yes, for another year." Harry told a small lie about his age.

"Well, if you've been home schooled, or attend a foreign school abroad, a short spell can help you. All children entering the magical school system have a basic monitoring spell placed on them by Ministry personal the first day of learning. The students never notice of course, but the first years are often separated on their first day of school for just this purpose."

'So that's why the first years take the rowboats instead of carriages,' Harry thought. 'There must be a wizard or witch in hiding spelling all of them. With all the attention on the castle and waterfall, they'd never notice a Ministry employee.'

"The counter spell is quite simple," Burkes continued, "just not well known. Now if you attend Hogwarts, that's a bit more complicated."

Harry slouched with that remark, so Burkes knew he did indeed attend Hogwarts. He continued, "Hogwarts also casts the same monitoring charm, as ordered by the Ministry, but since Dumbledore has been Headmaster, all the students have ingested a potion as well. It serves the same monitoring purpose, but far harder to overcome.

There is an antidote available I happen to have, but it's quite expensive you understand. The Ministry also frowns on such potions being made, so it's a bit of a grey matter you see."

'It's illegal you mean,' Harry thought. Still, he couldn't remember being forced to take any type of potion upon entering Hogwarts, and Harry was worried about being ripped off by the old man. So he asked, "When does Hogwarts give out this potion?"

"It's quite brilliant actually. At the beginning of the year feast, all the pumpkin juice and other beverages are laced with it. It lasts about a year, and is reinforced at the start of each term. Dumbledore may be a crazy old coot, but he does have a few good ideas now and again. I can only assume that if a student misses the feast, then they're fed the potion some other time individually. Dumbledore seems to keep tabs on who misses the feast, so he can make sure all his students have been affected. The potion not only lets him track students' magic usage during vacations, but he's able to monitor them throughout the school year as well. So now you know why the old man always seems to know who's been up to what."

Harry might have been surprised at one point in his naïve life that Dumbledore would lace their food with an unknown drug, but not anymore. 'Just one more way he manipulates those around him,' Harry thought. But Harry was also excited. If the counter charm was cast by the man, and Harry drank the potion's antidote, he'd be free to practice magic without fear of being expelled! So Harry told the man, "I'll take it, the potion and the counter charm."

"Very good then. Just remember to avoid drinking anything at the start of term feast. But don't be obvious about it, or they'll catch on that you know about the potion," Burkes warned Harry. He then took out his wand and waved it around Harry's head in a triangle pattern. Harry listened carefully in case he wanted to use the spell again, and barely caught the words "Tollo Pervigil Venificus."

Burkes finished the spell and put his wand away. "That's the easy part. The antidote will take me a few minutes to brew. Do you mind waiting?"

"Actually," said Harry, "I'd like to look through the books down here if you don't mind."

"Not a problem," Burkes let him know, "only the books though. The rest of the items are a bit dangerous if I'm not around. Simple security precautions you see. I'd wait till I returned to handle anything besides the books."

Harry agreed. After all, some of the creepy things looked like they might bite Harry if he got too close. Mr. Burkes slipped into a back room in the underground chamber, apparently to make the potion antidote. Being left alone, Harry walked back to the bookshelves to have a look around. "These books would certainly belong in the restricted section," Harry mumbled, "or not even there at all!" Some of the books were so dark and evil, Harry couldn't imagine a legitimate reason for his school to have them.

However, Harry wasn't looking to play nice, and picked out some of the books he liked. Six were about dangerous curses and hexes. Another choice, "Breaking the Will of the Weak Minded Wizard," was all about perfecting the Imperius Curse. There were also advanced Occlumency and Legilimency texts, which Harry immediately placed in his growing pile. "What the Ministry of Magic Doesn't Want You to Know" was the largest book Harry had seen, and for good reason. Inside were full instructions on casting all of the Ministry controlled magics. Portkey creation, forced apparition, advanced obliviation; all were thoroughly explained with great detail. There were even a few things that Harry had never heard of.

And the last book Harry chose was perhaps the darkest. Not just an illegal text, but a true Dark Arts book. "Unforgivable Curses of Foreign Ministries" listed the equivalent spells of the three British unforgivables from around the world. Some served the same purpose as the Imperius and Cruciatus, but had different incantations in foreign languages. There were a variety of killing curses as well. None of those were as powerful as the Avada Kedavra, and most of them could even be blocked, but the end result was death just the same. Harry didn't plan on using a whole lot of these curses, but thought that knowing about them would be a smart idea. He'd keep

an ear out for them, and would know that they're just as dangerous as the others.

A few more titles caught Harry's eye, but soon Mr. Burkes was back with a small vial in his hand, and Harry went to meet him. Burkes complimented Harry on his selection, and instructed Harry to drink the potion in the store. Burkes told Harry it was traceable to him, so he didn't want it to leave his possession. Harry drank the small vial of red liquid, and was surprised by its sweet taste. Almost like honey, with a bit of a kick. With his possessions in hand, Harry made his way back to the ladder to exit the underground chamber, when he was stopped by Burkes' strong voice.

"Just one more thing before you leave." Harry turned around and was shocked to see Burkes' wand pointed at him. "If Lucius Malfoy really sent you," he continued, "then he surely told you about what you'd have to do as a new customer?"

Harry had no idea what to do. His seemingly flawless plan wasn't so flawless after all. Harry wiped his face of its surprised expression, and addressed the man holding him at wand point. He couldn't fight the man off, because his wand arm was holding his new purchases. He thought another lie might get him in deeper trouble, so Harry told the truth.

"Er, ah, no, not really." But he quickly added on, "Malfoy did mention about having to do something unexpected, but he never said what it was."

Burkes lowered his wand a little and instructed Harry to put down the books and draw his wand. Harry was a bit confused at the statement, but flicked his wrist anyways, and was armed a moment later.

"Nice holster." Burkes seemed to like Harry's new purchase. "Hope I didn't scare you, but I got to make sure you're not an undercover agent or anything. With those items you're interested in, I could get in a lot of trouble. So I need you to prove that you aren't out to nab me."

Harry didn't know what to think. He had to give the man credit though. Harry had never thought about the possibility, but Burkes sure had. So he asked, "What do I have to do?"

Burkes thought a moment, and answered, "I chose something different each time. Those books however are very dangerous, so I don't think you'll mind what I'm thinking." He seemed to pause. "I want you to cast the Cruciatus on me, just for a few seconds. That way if you plan on telling anyone about what you've seen here, you'll be put in Azkaban as well."

Harry couldn't believe it. He had been thinking he might be forced to take a truth serum or something, but had never expected the man to willingly undergo the pain of the Cruciatus curse. Harry was so surprised by the request, he hadn't yet realized that he was the one who'd have to cast it. "Are you sure? I mean, I happen to know first hand how much pain that curse causes. Isn't there something else you'd want?"

"Nope," Burkes continued, and almost had a look of excitement, "I want you to cruciate me. Nothing too strong, and only for a few seconds. Don't get any ideas either. We're locked in this chamber, and you're not getting out without my help."

Again, Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. Beside the unbelievable fact that the man actually wanted the most painful curse in existence cast against him, Harry had some qualms about using the curse. He had used it before on Lestrange in the Ministry just a week ago, and it had almost made him sick. Burkes was undoubtedly a shady character, but Harry held no real malice towards the man. He didn't even know if he'd even be able to use the curse properly. Lestrange had only been affected for an instant, and then laughed the rest off. Harry wasn't worried about getting carried away, and certainly wasn't worried about Burkes turning him in. He just couldn't believe someone would want the curse cast on them intentionally. However, Harry had gotten himself into this mess, and there was only one way out.

"If you're sure then?" Harry asked very carefully as he slowly pointed his wand at Burkes.

"Yes, just give me a bit of a warning." Burkes put away his own wand and seemed to brace himself for the pain. Again, Harry saw what could only be described as gleeful excitement in his eyes. Strange man.

"Ok then, on the count of three." Harry cleared his mind and concentrated on the spell he was about to use. Not trusting Lestrange's advice about needing to feel hate for the spell to work properly, Harry intended to concentrate on the feeling he suffered from the time Voldemort cast the Cruciatus against him. If he caused Burkes even a fraction of that pain, then he'd be successful. Harry only hoped he didn't go too far. He didn't want to make it painless in case not being able to cast it properly would disappoint Burkes, but he didn't want the man to go insane either.

With a final deep breathe, Harry opened his eyes and addressed Burkes. "Here we go then....one, two, three," and with the countdown over, Harry said in a clear and loud voice, not quite yelling, "CRUCIO!"

A red beam of light shot out the end of his wand, and hit Burkes directly in the chest. He started to scream even before the light had hit him, and Harry almost lowered his wand then. But he didn't want to have to repeat the experience, so he kept his wand trained at the man as he continued to scream and sink to the ground. Burkes was shaking uncontrollably, and pawing at his own body. Harry thought he was about to claw his own eyes out too, and lowered his wand just as the man started to yank on his hair. To Harry the time that passed felt like an eternity, but a glance at his watch showed only four seconds had gone by.

Burkes remained on the floor for a long while, slowly regaining his composure. Harry did the same, swallowing down the rising bile in his throat. He didn't feel as repulsed with himself as he did last time, but Harry was still very uncomfortable with what he had just done. Burkes finally stood with his back to Harry, and pulled a small vial out of his robe pocket. It was a yellowish color, like mustard, and Burkes drank it quickly. Harry thought it had to be something for the pain. Burkes

then replaced the empty vial in his pocket, and turned around to face Harry.

After a deep breath, he spoke, “I must say, that was a very strong Cruciatus for such a young man.” A normal person would have complained about this fact, but Burkes looked like he had very much enjoyed it. Harry felt sick as he couldn’t avoid noticing the man’s obvious arousal poking at the front of his robes. “It’s evident this isn’t your first time using that curse. Very impressive.”

‘And Aunt Petunia calls me a freak!’ Harry thought. But he swallowed his revulsion and replied to the man. “Not actually the first time, no,” Harry had no intention on mentioning it was only his second time, “and I’m sorry if it was a bit too strong. I tried to hold back.”

Mr. Burkes looked surprised, and a large smile appeared on his face. “Don’t worry, not too much, just stronger than I was expecting. We’ll have to do this again sometime!”

Harry didn’t think it likely, but nodded and followed the wizard as he slowly climbed up the stairs and opened the trapdoor. Once back in the upper rear room, the door was closed, and the desk magically reappeared. He and Burkes made for the front room where the money machine was placed, and Harry took out his money pouch to pay for his purchases.

“Here you go,” Harry said as he slid the galleons and sickles across the counter, “and here’s a bit extra for your trouble. I hope we can both keep quiet about my made purchases.” Harry had given the man an extra fifty galleons on top of the already large price. It couldn’t hurt to pad the strange man’s pockets.

“Thank you sir,” Burkes replied, “and have no fear. My business wouldn’t nearly be as successful without a high level of discretion.”

And with that Harry expanded his new trunk, placed the dark books into the first compartment, and was out the door as quickly as possible.

With the darker books purchased, Harry completed his shopping list and could have then headed back to the Leaky Cauldron; but he didn't. There weren't too many other shops in Knockturn Alley that interested Harry, but he thought he'd have a quick look around anyway. He wasn't likely to be back anytime soon, and thought looking around couldn't possibly hurt.

A few more strange boutiques passed by, none of the items in the windows appealing to Harry. He rounded the end corner, and started his way back to the Diagon Alley entrance. He soon came upon a small store, which seemed uncomfortably sandwiched between two larger buildings. The windows were boarded up, but there was an open sign below the marquee that read 'Dead Wizard Possessions.' It was just past eight o'clock, so Harry thought that he could spend a few minutes inside, and still get a good night's sleep.

The inside of the store was neat and orderly, and yet crammed and full at the same time. There was a method to the madness, not that Harry could figure it out. It was at least as crowded as the junk shop in Diagon Alley, and looked like it held the same type of possessions as well. A middle aged witch sat in an armchair off to the side, and Harry approached her.

"Excuse me ma'am," Harry asked, "but what does the sign mean by dead wizard possessions?"

"Just what it sounds like boy!" She spat. "All the things in here, once belonged to someone who's now dead. Sometimes the family sells the items if they need money, or just throw them out and I pick it up later. Most of this junk's not too useful, but a few items are worth something. You just have to wade through all the shite to find the rare pearl."

She was clear with her answer that she didn't want to hear anymore questions, and so Harry left her alone to look through the sloppy aisles. He saw old textbooks, used clothes, even some snapped wands. There was a lot of other junk, but Harry found something of much worth tucked under a torn cloak twenty minutes later. A pensieve! If that wasn't a rare pearl, then what was?

Harry hadn't even thought about purchasing a pensieve, and he wondered why. He knew Dumbledore used one to sift through his thoughts and help him think through difficult decisions, and Harry thought that it didn't sound like a bad idea. He didn't even know where to normally find something as unique as a pensieve, and praised his luck at finding one in this strange shop.

It was a bit different than the one Dumbledore, and then Snape had used. This model was a bit larger, a little deeper, and had a stone lid to keep nosy teenagers out of it. It was made of an olive colored marble, with raised runes that were painted blood red. Turning the pensieve over, Harry also found a small piece of parchment spell-taped to the bottom with initials written on it. "E.R."

Harry supposed they were the initials of the person who the pensieve had once belonged to, and turned it back over. The stone lid was held in place by a leather strap, and opened on a metal hinge once the strap was removed. Harry was surprised once he looked inside, however, because the empty stone basin he expected to find was really quite full. It still held the memories of whoever E.R. was.

Harry felt a little nervous about dipping into a stranger's memories, and didn't want to regardless, in the middle of a shop in Knockturn Alley. He could always look through them later, or just dump them out if he wanted.

The mean witch just gave him a price when he went to purchase the pensieve, two hundred seventy three galleons and some change. She didn't ask any questions, and Harry didn't mind in the least. He paid as quickly as possible and left. He had no intention of chatting with the witch about who the pensieve might have belonged to; Harry hadn't gotten a good vibe from her.

So with one more purchase in his trunk, Harry made for the door. He was feeling good at the moment, as the pensieve wasn't nearly as expensive as Harry thought it might have been. That's when he noticed a man two stores down who seemed to be looking at him. Harry remembered the man from seeing him earlier in the day, and didn't want to be recognized. Harry could just see tomorrow's Daily Prophet headlines. "Boy-Who-Lived Shopping For Dark Arts in

Knockturn Alley!" No, Harry most certainly didn't want to see that article, so he turned back the way he had come, and ducked into a large building he'd already passed by.

Harry didn't know what to make of the store. It was fairly large, and had a muggle neon light in the window. It was because of the neon, which spelled out "Body Art," that made Harry pause. "What's a neon light doing in Knockturn Alley?" He needed a place to lay low however. If he spent a few minutes in the store, Harry thought the man would go away.

Had he spent more time in the muggle world, and led less of a sheltered life, Harry would have recognized the place as a tattoo parlor even from the outside. It looked just the same as any other tattoo parlor in muggle London would, with the exception that the drawings and designs adorning the walls all moved, just like the magical portraits at Hogwarts. There was also a large selection of small rings and bars, decorated with small beads and crystals. Body piercing, Harry knew.

"You, lad! Can I do something for ya?" A big burley man stepped towards Harry, and was a bit frightening. Although Harry could tell the man was a wizard from his wand worn in a belt holster, he was not like any wizard Harry had seen before.

The man had hair a color that would surprise even Tonks, and must have had at least three rings in each ear. The man's bulky arms were displayed by the sleeveless robes he wore, and showed off a dozen or more tattoos, that freely moved to visit with each other. 'If there were such thing as biker wizards,' Harry thought, 'they would look like this man!'

"Umm, sorry. I just stepped inside when I noticed the muggle neon. Just looking really," Harry stammered an answer.

"Well, fell free to look around. The neon's a new addition, someone told me it's a bit of an industry must-have. Nice to know it's working." The man paused and looked at Harry more closely. "Hey, you know if you're underage you can't be getting anything in here without a guardian's permission, right?"

Harry didn't think Uncle Vernon would ever let him get a tattoo, muggle or magical. It was too far from normal. "What if I don't have a guardian? I've been on my own for a while."

The man asked, "Where's your parents kid? Someone's got to be looking out for you."

"Nope," Harry answered, "I've been on my own for four years now. My parents died, and I was placed with relatives, but they threw me out. I look after myself now." It wasn't the truth, but it was how Harry had always felt.

"Besides, I'm seventeen in a few weeks." Now that was a blatant lie. His birthday would be in just about five weeks, but it would be another year before Harry became an adult. "I'm just small for my age."

The man nodded and said nothing, and went back to polishing what looked like some equipment. Harry looked around the shop, and spotted a few designs he liked. There were magical creatures of all kind, and a few pictures of famous witches and wizards as well. Harry spotted the house crests of the four Hogwarts' houses, and a few other crests which he thought might belong to pureblood families. There were also the typical images as well. Butterflies, anchors, hearts, and even a cheesy "I Love Mum" picture could be found on the walls.

"You found anything you like? I suppose if you're on your own, no one will bitch at me if I let you get inked." Harry forgot that the man was still in the shop, and jumped at his question.

Harry had never before considered anything like getting a tattoo. He didn't even know that there were magical ones to be had. He wasn't opposed to the idea, and had even seen some shows on the telly in his youth that had cool looking tattooed men in them, but Harry didn't think he could just slap on any random picture. Although he liked a few pictures of phoenixes and griffins he'd seen, Harry thought he might be a little young to make such a drastic choice.

"Some of these are pretty cool," Harry admitted, "but I don't think I'm interested. If I did decide to get a tattoo, I'd want it to be personal, and mean more than just a random picture off some wall."

"Yeah, you're a wise lad aren't you? Smart thinking! Too many young wizards make mistakes like what you just said, and come to regret it." The man put his leg up on a chair and lifted his robe a little. "Come here, I want to show you my first mistake."

Harry approached the man cautiously, and looked at his leg. It too was covered in many images darting around on his skin.

"See this name here," he pointed to an elegantly written SANDRA that was dancing around his ankle, "she was me first girlfriend. Thought I was in love, and that we'd marry. Two months later she ran off with some bloke, and I haven't seen her since. This damn tattoo likes to remind me of the stupidity of my youth, and constantly creeps up all over my body just to annoy me."

"And see this one here," the man now pointed to a Mexican looking man with a large red cape, "I tattooed this matador here to go around chasing Sandra, and try to cover her up. It worked for the first few years, but now he's grown tired, and doesn't go after her like he's supposed to."

He supposed it was a sore point for the large man, but Harry couldn't think it was one of the funniest things he'd seen all day. He tried to hold in his laughter, but a small smile did creep out.

The man only smiled back. "It is a bit funny, ain't it? You're lucky you caught me on a good day, or else I would've pounded you."

"Sorry," Harry apologized, "but I couldn't help it. I've never seen a magical tattoo before, and that story was just too funny." Harry was outright laughing now. "Tell me," Harry asked, "Does Sandra ever wonder over parts she shouldn't?" Harry was still giggling after he asked the question.

The man joined in Harry's laughter now. "That's between me and Sandra here. But between you and me, she sure does have a nice feel to her."

Harry was almost on the floor now, laughing so hard. 'Maybe if Ron doesn't get over his fears and ask her out,' Harry joked with himself, 'I'll get him a HERMIONE tattoo.' Harry was now tearing with mirth. He cackled some more as he continued that train of thought. 'With his luck though, it'll just boss him to study more!'

Harry tried to calm down as the man rolled his robes back over his leg. He pushed the chair back in place, and bent down to unlock a cabinet. When he came back up with what looked like an ink bottle, the man's smiling face was gone.

"Now, if you're worried about not having a tattoo that's personal enough, then this here's another option." He held out the ink bottle, and Harry could see the dark liquid inside was a bit thinner than parchment ink should be. "This is a type of tribal tattoo that American Indian wizards use, and it's pretty powerful."

Harry looked at the strange bottle and asked what it did.

"Well you see, Indians drink this potion, and it gets into your bloodstream. Burns like hell it does! You ever eat a hot pepper? Well, imagine that feeling coursing through your veins. After about five minutes, the potion starts working its way out of the bloodstream, and works its way to the surface of your skin. It could appear anywhere on your body, and the form it takes is influenced a person's subconscious and magical aura. The tattoo shape appears in the form of a welt, clearly visible, and that's how I know where to ink ya."

The man bent down again and brought out a tray of different colored ink bottles. "This ink here I only use for the Indian tats. They combine with the potion and counter its effects. Once a person drinks the potion, and the design works its way to the skin, you got to use this ink. If you don't, it continues to burn, and the welt turns into a scar. Eventually the potion would leak out your body, but that would hurt something nasty. The ink and the potion work like an acid and base, you see. They cancel each other out."

Harry had never heard of anything like it before. He wondered what type of tattoo might be made by such a personal experience, and asked the man if he had one.

"Yeah, got one about five years ago." The man quickly added on, "But don't ask to see it. Most people don't like to share these tattoos. They're very personal, and they don't always turn out to be a good thing."

Harry asked what the man meant, and he explained.

"Well, if you're a decent enough person, you end up liking the tattoo. Like I said, it's formed by your magical aura. But some other people, ones who have secrets to hide, or aren't too nice, come out with bad designs. The people end up subconsciously punishing themselves, because they know deep inside that they deserve it. These tattoos aren't just pretty colors, you see, they got magical properties too. Some tattoos, like the bad ones I mentioned, cause pain and hurt. Some other tattoos feel good, and cause pleasure. There's no way to tell what the tattoos will do until it's on. That's why I keep my supply hidden. I don't like to show it off to too many people."

Harry was curious about that also, so asked the man. "They're not illegal or anything, if that's what you mean. It's just that most people, especially the older one gets, always have something to hide. They'd be risking a bad tattoo without even knowing it. I only usually show off these inks to people I know well, who I like. I don't know you from beans, but you seem to be a good kid. And if you've been on your own for awhile now, you must have some strength of character. The stuff's pretty pricy though, about ninety galleons per tattoo, depending on its size."

If asked a month ago, Harry would never dream of getting a tattoo. But now he was seriously considering it. It would end up being extremely personal, and it could be something that he could keep to himself. It would also be a symbol of his new independent attitude, and his rebellion against Dumbledore and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix. Harry walked away from the counter, and seriously thought about whether he wanted to go through with it or not. He didn't think

he'd end up with an evil tattoo or anything. He had felt guilty over Cedric and Sirius' deaths at one point, but had already stopped blaming himself for those. 'If anything,' Harry thought, 'these tattoos could help me fight against Voldemort. If that's what my life's purpose is supposed to be, then surely my subconscious will know it. Something like this could prove useful.'

So with that thought Harry told the burly man he wanted the tribal tattoo. After making sure Harry had thought the decision through clearly, he led Harry into a back stall. A woman came out from the back room to attend to the shop, and the man brought the small bottles in with him.

"Ok," he said, "before you drink this potion, strip. Down to your shorts. I gotta be able to see where the potion comes to surface."

Harry nodded hesitantly, but did remove his robes and muggle clothes. His first thoughts that the guy was a perv were put to rest when he realized this must be a natural occurrence in a tattoo parlor. He left his ski cap on though, as it only covered his hair. With any luck the potion wouldn't appear on his head, and Harry wouldn't have to take the cap off.

"Now, I'm going to use a silencing charm and body bind on you, just in case you can't take the pain. That way you don't hurt yourself. Then I'll pour the potion in your mouth. Five minutes later, most of the pain will stop, and you'll just feel burning on the skin where the potion's breaking through. Any question?"

Harry didn't have any, and was nervous enough as it was, so shook his head quickly before he could change his mind. Then with a spoken "Silencio" and "Petrificus Totalus," Harry was unable to speak and in a full body bind, still standing in the middle of the small stall. The tattoo artist grabbed hold of Harry so he wouldn't fall over, and then poured the potion into his mouth.

It tasted nasty, but Harry was so stiff he couldn't even gag. The foul potion worked its way to the back of his mouth, and seemed to make its way down his throat as if on its own accord. That's when the pain began. Instead of going down his throat into his stomach, the potion

seemed to rip into Harry's bloodstream with a burning sensation, just like he had eaten a hot pepper.

Fred and George had once invented a candy bar, Habanero Heath Crunch, that Harry had the misfortune of eating accidentally. It was made with the world's hottest hot pepper, a Habanero, which was about 100,000 times hotter than a jalapeno. Harry's mouth had been on fire that day for hours. This new feeling was so much worse.

The feeling wasn't just in his mouth, although that's where it started. It soon began to creep down his body, towards his chest, and through his entire head. Harry had no trouble telling when the heat hit his heart, because then the painful feeling shot threw the rest of his body, with a burning jolt each time his heart beat.

If he could have screamed out, he would have. At least with the Cruciatus a person passed out after awhile, but not with this form of torture. It seemed to go on forever, spreading through his entire body, until it soon slowed and a different burning sensation appeared on Harry's back. It was different in that it seemed to tingle, and the burning was closer to his skin, and not in the bloodstream. The pain increased as it burrowed its way to the surface, but the extreme heat in Harry's body dulled to a low ache.

Another minute later and the experience was over, the only pain that remained centered on three points on his back. The man, Harry still didn't know his name, stood again to support Harry as he ended the spells he'd cast, and helped him to a nearby seat. "There now, it's all over, at least the bad part. That wasn't too bad now, was it?"

Harry looked at the man like he was crazy. "Not too bad!" Harry shouted. "That was the most painful thing I've ever been through in my life! And if you knew anything about me, that would tell you it's quite a lot!"

The artist laughed as he assembled his instruments on a small metal table. "Well, I admit, it did look a tad more painful than I remember. But you only have yourself to blame for that."

Harry was seriously considering hitting the man who easily outweighed him by a hundred pounds. Harry was being laughed at, and he didn't much like it. And how could he be blamed for experiencing more pain than he should have had?

The artist seemed to see the anger in Harry's brown eyes though, and calmed him down. "Relax kid, I didn't mean anything by it. I just mean that you've had a bit of an unusual case. Instead of one normal tattoo appearing, you have three separate ones. I've never seen more than one tattoo appear at a time, and they're a bit smaller than normal too. I just meant that for whatever reason, your subconscious decided on three tattoos, that's why there was extra pain. So really, you can't blame me."

Harry calmed down at hearing the explanation, and tried to see over his shoulder what designs had appeared. He could see a red patch of skin on his right shoulder blade, and another on his left. The third patch of red Harry couldn't see, but he sure felt it. It was centered on his back, just above his waistline. Harry couldn't make out any of the details from his awkward viewing angle, and got up to look around for a mirror.

"Now don't worry about what they look like just yet, we still got some work to do. So unless you want that potion burning through you skin, let's get started. Besides, you'll like them better if you see them in full color the first time." The man steered Harry to the chair he'd been using, and instructed Harry to sit on it backwards. Hunched over the hard chair, Harry watched the tattoo artist conjure another chair behind him, and arranged the metal table with his tools within reach.

"Just sit back and relax now," the man told Harry. "This will still hurt a bit, but be nothing like what you just went through. Concentrate on breathing evenly, and it'll help with the pain. It'll all be over soon."

So that's what Harry did, and let the man get to work. The artist started on Harry's left shoulder, and at first the pain hardly seemed like anything. It even seemed to quench the heat coming from the potion's burning sensation. After a few minutes though, the pain increased slowly, until it became a steady ache. It felt like when he was little, and scrapped his knees on the playground. Then a school

nurse would come by and pour disinfectant on them. It was tolerable, but Harry did have a few unshed tears in his eyes.

Harry only spoke once, to ask the man which colors he was using, and how he knew which to use. The man responded that the welts on his back had a different look to them, and over the years he had learned which colors to use with which type of welts. It seemed Harry's subconscious had picked out not only the tattoo designs, but their colors as well.

Each shoulder blade took about forty minutes to completely ink in, the one on the small of his back only thirty. That one surprisingly hurt the most. His skin was more sensitive there, and Harry had to stand in an awkward position to allow the artist access to his lower back.

Finally, almost two hours after Harry walked into the shop just to look, the man finished. He packed up his instruments, put his tribal inks away, and muttered a few healing charms over Harry's new markings. The man explained they wouldn't have to be bandaged like muggle tattoos, but would still ache for up to a week. They both left the stall together. Harry had put his pants back on, but carried his shirt and robes so he could see his new tattoos. The artist said there was a three way mirror he could use in another stall.

"Alright kid, you go in and look all you want," he said. "I'm going back up front to relieve Nora, she's due off soon. After you're back in gear, come up to the front and I'll ring you up."

Harry nodded as the man left. The stall with the mirror was a bit more spacious than the other, and off to the side was a large chair with stirrups attached to it. "Ouch!" Harry knew what that chair was for. "I wouldn't do that for all the gold in Gringotts!"

The mirror thankfully wasn't a wizarding one, so it couldn't tell Harry how stupid and irresponsible he'd been for getting a tattoo. He set his shirt and robes aside, and stepped onto the small platform facing the three way mirror. Before he even turned around, Harry noticed how pale he'd become over the years. He used to have a deep tan from all the yard work his aunt had made him do. Harry promised himself

that he'd work on his tan this summer while getting more into shape, and turned around to look at his new tattoos.

What he saw made him cry, and not because of any physical pain.

On each of his shoulder blades were two animals, about the size of his fist. They were also looking at each other, as if they knew who the other was. And they did, for Harry recognized them as well. His left shoulder was covered with a four legged creature colored mostly white, outlined in black with gold highlights. It was a stag; the animagus form of his father. "Hello Prongs," Harry whispered.

His right shoulder blade was covered not surprisingly by a large black dog, with a goofy grin and floppy ears. Although he should have been colored a dark black, the dog was actually more of a charcoal grey color, with icy blue eyes. He was highlighted in gold as well, and looked very distinguished. "Hello Padfoot," Harry greeted him.

He hadn't taken a look at his lower back yet, but Harry did then, almost expecting to find a werewolf. But his third tattoo wasn't an animal. It was a small delicate flower; and no it was not a petunia. It was a lily. Harry didn't know what color lilies normally were, but this one was a pale auburn, with an emerald green stem and highlights. Just like the red hair and piercing eyes his mother had had. "Hi mum," Harry cried.

It might have seemed sad to a stranger, to hear that Harry had symbols of his dead parents and godfather tattooed on his back. It wasn't sad though, it made Harry happy. He felt reassured in a way he hadn't ever been before, and oddly comforted by them. The tattoo artist said the tribal tattoos wouldn't begin to show their magical properties until the marks were completely healed, and Harry couldn't wait to see what his guardian's tattoos could do.

It took Harry a few minutes to stop crying and wipe his face, and then another minute to put his clothes back on. He'd have time to look at the tattoos more another time, but it was getting late. His watch told Harry it was approaching eleven at night, and he wanted to get to his room at the Leaky Cauldron soon. Harry was exhausted.

So he entered the front room and paid the man, thanking him for his guidance. The price ended up being just a bit more than the man quoted, but that was because there were three separate tattoos. If the shopkeeper knew how much the tattoos had meant to Harry, he could have tripled the price.

With a last wave goodbye, Harry exited the shop and headed for the tavern. The streets were noticeably more deserted than a few hours ago, and Harry wanted to get out of Knockturn Alley as quickly as possible. The witch's warning from the eyeglass shop about dangerous people still rung sound in Harry's mind, and for good reason too. Not one minute after Harry had stepped out of the tattoo parlor, the same man Harry had noticed earlier that evening stepped out of the shadows to confront Harry.

"You there, cough up your galleons! And be quick about it!" He ordered.

Harry looked around for help, but there was no one else in sight. He thought about yelling out for help, but the man could kill him and be gone faster than anybody would come to his rescue. As it was now, Harry had his back pressed up against a wall with the man about four feet in front of him; his wand pointing at Harry's chest.

"I don't have much money. Just a few sickles for candy!" Harry was trying to stall for time as he thought up a plan.

The man wasn't buying Harry's story though. "Don't be lying now sonny, you might get hurt. I've been following you all day long, and you've been in practically every store on the block. You've been spending money all over town, and now I want the rest!"

'He's been watching me all day?' Harry questioned himself. 'No wonder he knows I've got some money on me. I've been everywhere today!' Harry was still stalling, as he searched his empty pockets for the money pouch that wasn't there. Harry had been keeping it in his tiny trunk since entering Knockturn Alley, and was glad he did now. The few extra seconds this provided led Harry to think about some of the purchases he'd made that day. 'Of course!' Harry remembered.

'I'm wearing my new wand holster. And I can use magic now! He won't know about it, and I can stun him.'

Harry muttered something about being able to not find his wallet, while he pretended to be more scared than he really was. Harry had faced Death Eaters and Voldemort himself, and a street mugger wasn't too much cause for concern in his opinion. And so Harry continued his charade, until he had backed away another foot or so, and went to bring out his wand. With a flick of his wrist, the wand came flying out of Harry's holster, and the street mugger never had time to react. Unfortunately, Harry wasn't as lucky as he was in the basement of Borgin & Burkes, and his hand missed the grab as his wand continued past his closed fist, and hit the mugger's chest with a dull thump.

The mugger laughed an evil cackle. "What's this? You've got an auror's holster, and can't even use it!" He continued to cackle, then grew dead serious. "I might have just let you go after taking your money before, but now I think I'll have to rough you up a bit." Harry didn't know what to do as the mugger stepped on his wand, and shoved Harry to the dirty ground.

"A bit of pain I think to teach you a lesson." The man pointed his wand at Harry's head, and was thinking about what curse to use against him. Harry himself just got a lot more scared than he'd been before he'd lost his wand. He was now defenseless, and moments away from being cursed. He swore to himself about choosing to pack away the dagger he'd bought earlier, and Harry whished he had it now.

So Harry did the only thing he thought of, and crawled back on his elbows and feet as the man reached his silent decision.

"Crawl all you want kid," the man teased, "it'll hurt just the same. I think a nice blast would look good on you. Or rather, through you. REDUCTO!"

Harry heard the curse, and saw the light form on the end of the mugger's wand. He couldn't believe he was going to die, or be seriously maimed, just as he'd decided to take control of his life. It

was ironic also, that even the four attempts Voldemort had made on his life, hadn't brought Harry as close to death as he was right then. He wanted to close his eyes, but Harry wouldn't, and vowed to meet his death head on if it came. And that's when Harry saw a blur of white fly over him, moving between himself and the man's wand. Hedwig.

Hedwig it seemed, although angry at Harry for entering Knockturn Alley, had been following him faithfully, keeping an eye out for him. What kind of friend would she be otherwise? And while she was momentarily upset at her master, she didn't want him to die. So as she saw the mugger point his wand at Harry's prone position, Hedwig took off from her perch on a building awning and flew down to save her master. And she did.

Harry didn't know what happened in the next few seconds. He remembered a few images and sounds, but had no clear recollection of a timeline. If he could remember, he would have known that Hedwig flew down to save him, and took the full blast of the Reductor curse on her back and right wing. He would have remembered kicking at the surprised man with his legs, which sent his wand flying away. And Harry would have remembered scrambling to find his own wand, and turning on the man who was doing the same.

With a shout of "STUPIFY" Harry knocked the man out, and sat up from the dirty cold street. It took another second, but Harry then remembered the white blur that'd saved him. Turning to his left, Harry spotted Hedwig in a bloody heap, still barely moving.

The Reductor curse had injured her back, and burnt off most of her feathers. There was also a hole the size of a snitch blown through her wing, where the curse was focused. Blood and bits of bone could be seen in the red puddle that was steadily growing larger around the owl. For the third time that day, Harry cried.

There was no way that Hedwig could survive, Harry knew. Even if her injuries weren't as extensive, Eeylop's had closed long ago. There was no clean water around to clean the wounds, and Harry had

nothing to bandage his friend's wing with. "I'm sorry Hedwig!" Harry cried. "I'm so sorry!"

Harry took off his robes and wrapped them around the dying form of his pet owl. He didn't care what happened to the mugger anymore; Harry just wanted to get out of Knockturn Alley. So with that thought Harry finally reached Diagon Alley, and made a sharp right turn as he approached the Leaky Cauldron. The streets were totally empty, and not a sound was heard except a young man's cries.

Harry entered the tavern carrying Hedwig like a baby, not saying a word, and quickly made his way upstairs to room number four. Once inside, he laid Hedwig down on the bed, and stroked her head and uttered words of love until she stopped moving. It took three more minutes for Hedwig to finally die, and with one more strained breath, she closed her eyes and was still.

Tomorrow, Harry would have to bury his snowy owl.

AUTHOR NOTES:

So, do you think I'm evil? Of course Hedwig was going to die. You didn't think I made her follow Harry around 5 whole chapters for nothing, did you? What will Harry do though? Will he sell her body parts as illegal potion ingredients? Naaaa, we'll just have to wait until the next chapter to find out. Hope everyone liked my "surprising dark twist." I also hoped everyone liked my tattoo parlor scene. I've never been in one, and don't have any tattoos or piercings, so I hope I did the scene justice. For those interested, Habaneros really are that hot, and the panic people go through after eating them have been known to cause mild heart attacks. If you enjoy hot foods as I do, try using a very small amount of cooked peppers to spice up food. And if anyone has the balls to eat a raw pepper, I'd be very impressed. Thanks again for reading. Next chapter, muggle London and Harry returns to Privet Drive.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you

would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 6 - Muggle London

Harry spent what must have seemed like hours weeping over his poor pet owl, who'd died to protect him, but it was really only about five minutes. Hedwig's body was still warm and bloody, and still wrapped in the robes Harry would never wear again. She laid upon a bed in the room Harry had rented earlier that day, still surrounded by a pool of her own blood. Harry was beginning to lose it. His sanity. Too many people were dying trying to save his life, and Harry just wanted it to stop. Seemingly random thoughts were crossing his mind, a way to distract himself from Hedwig. Not realizing what he was saying, Harry started mumbling about having to replace the ruined sheets for Tom.

Harry had been caressing Hedwig's neck when she had died, and his hand still remained there. "Maybe I'm not ready?" Harry thought. "Maybe I'm not ready to take on Voldemort? If a single street mugger can do this, what's to stop a pack of Death Eaters from doing worse? And why is Hedwig getting warmer?"

Although he had seen a few dead bodies, Harry had never actually touched one before. Cedric didn't count, because Harry was scrambling to stay alive at the time. But he had seen enough television to know that dead bodies were supposed to lose heat after death, not get warmer. So why was Hedwig's body starting to burn up? That's the thought that brought Harry out of his stupor. Hedwig was almost uncomfortable to the touch, and soon Harry wouldn't even be able to do that.

Harry stood up slowly from his kneeled position, and let go of Hedwig as he backed away. The physical distance seemed to distance him emotionally as well, and he forgot for the moment about his owl dying. Instead he concentrated on why a dead body was heating up, and quickly at that. He didn't have much time to think though, because the robes and sheets surrounding Hedwig's body soon began to smoke and char.

Harry didn't want to start a fire, so he ran to the small sink in his room to fill a glass with water. By the time he'd returned to his bed,

Hedwig's body was now sizzling, and small flames began to form around it.

Harry was shocked once more, and thought the fire was some unknown side effect from the Reductor curse. While he pondered this, he forgot about the glass of water in his right hand. Another minute later, the whole bed was smoking, and the owl's body was completely engulfed in flames. Harry remembered the glass of water, and doused the bed with it, but it was too late for that. The water seemed to steam and evaporate before it even hit the flames.

Harry backed away from the bed even farther, and cast a water charm around the bed, to thoroughly soak the wood and carpets on the floor. Harry had no idea what was going on, but he didn't want to be responsible for Tom's bar being burnt down either. And that's when Harry heard it, right after finishing his water charm and backing away into the farthest corner possible. It was a sound he had heard before; a sound that had filled his heart with hope.

It was Phoenix Song! Harry looked towards the window expecting to see Fawkes, but the window was closed. He then looked to the door, but it too was shut. All this time the phoenix song was getting louder and more steady. Harry listened closer to it, and realized it wasn't coming from outside the room. It wasn't even coming from Fawkes. It was coming from his burning bed!

The flames had thoroughly burnt through the bed sheets and mattress by now, and nothing was left but a charred pile of ashes. The water charm Harry had used prevented the rest of the room from going up in flames, and Harry silently thanked the little Professor Flitwick for teaching him. The only sources of fire now were the small flames centered on the pile of ashes, right where Hedwig had been. The flames were a brilliant red, with yellow and gold flickers spread throughout. As the phoenix song reached its crescendo, in an almost deafening volume, the flames flared up even brighter, and hotter. There was a pure white in the middle of the red now, and the red began to diminish.

Then there was a loud explosion, and the flames erupted in a fiery blaze. The phoenix song let out one last loud note, and then stopped.

Harry had had to cover his eyes when the explosion happened, and when he uncovered them a moment later, the room was filled with smoke. He could still hear the last note of the beautiful phoenix song, but it faded to a low whisper as the smoke cleared. Soon Harry could make out objects in his room. The window that was previously closed had blown out with the explosion of flames. The smoke was rolling out into the night sky, and letting in a cool breeze. That's when Harry saw the most wonderful thing that could have happened to him that day.

"Hedwig? Is that you?" Harry barely uttered through his tears. He was excited, relieved, nervous, and extremely happy all at the same time. Sitting on the bed's pile of ashes, just able to be seen through the thinning smoke, was a brilliant Phoenix, pure white with red and gold tail feathers. She was a bit smaller than Fawkes was, but had a larger wingspan, and a slightly straighter beak. It seemed Hedwig hadn't died after all.

Hedwig flew to Harry's shoulder, and perched there just as she had so many times before. She trilled an answer to Harry that he seemed to understand. "Yes it's me, and I'm glad to see him too!"

Harry completely lost it then, bawling his eyes out as he grabbed his long time companion in a rough hug. Hedwig spoke a word of surprise, but gave in to the death grip. The two friends stayed like that for an eternity, as Harry cried his happiness and Hedwig soothed her master with the calming power of a phoenix.

The bed was gone, but Harry didn't care. He conjured a small pillow and laid down on the floor, with Hedwig in the crook of his arms. The phoenix's calming influence helped coax Harry to sleep after a very eventful day, and soon Harry fell into the best sleep of his life.

The next morning Harry woke at nine o'clock, after a bit of a lay in. His sleepy mind had forgotten some of the details of the previous night, and his first thought was "Why am I on the floor?"

A quick glance at the non-existent bed brought all of Harry's memories slamming forward, and he panicked as he glanced around the room. Hedwig was nowhere in sight, and Harry was afraid he had dreamt the whole episode. But almost as if she could sense Harry's

fears, Hedwig appeared a moment later in the broken window, and landed on the back of a chair off to the side of the room.

"Morning girl! I was afraid there for a moment." Harry told his new, but yet old phoenix.

Hedwig trilled a greeting, sang a few notes, and Harry was surprised at how well he understood what the bird was trying to say. He'd always had a special connection with Hedwig, but as an owl, he had only reacted to her attitude and instincts. As a phoenix, Hedwig seemed almost capable of speech, and Harry thought he knew exactly what she said. She had said, "It's about time you got up. You have a lot to do today. And don't forget to see Tom about the bed!"

Harry smiled and said, "You're absolutely right. I think from now on girl, I'll be listening to what you have to say a lot more than I used to."

Hedwig trilled an "It's about time!" and flew back out the window. Harry supposed she was hunting or just taking a look around, and he started to get ready for his day. A quick shower later, Harry crawled into a spare change of muggle clothes he had packed in Dudley's old bag. He'd be buying more today, and soon would be rid of the cast offs forever. As he put his bag back into his expanded trunk, Harry realized that he could have spent the night in the luxurious bedroom, rather than on the hard floor. He'd have to remember that for later. Harry had planned on getting a few things for his bedroom at Privet Drive for the summer, but thought now he could spend all his time in his new trunk instead.

On his way out the door, all clean and ready for the new day, Hedwig once again reappeared in the window, and flew to Harry.

"Sorry girl," Harry apologized, "but you can't come with me today. I'm going into muggle London, and I don't think too many people have seen a phoenix. Think you can keep an eye on me from the sky?"

Hedwig nodded an agreement, and flew out the window for a third time that morning. Harry left the room himself, locked the door behind him, and went downstairs to tell Tom the bad news about his room.

"Morning there Harry, how'd you sleep?" Tom greeted Harry loudly. Harry was a bit nervous about his name being shouted across the room, but few turned to look at him. The few that did saw a muggle kid in a black ski cap with brown eyes, and turned away soon enough.

"Fine Tom, fine. That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. You see, er, I had a little trouble with my bed last night." Harry didn't know what else to say.

Tom was surprised. He took great pride in his lodgings. "Sorry about that, I don't know what could have been the trouble. I'll move your room for tonight if you like."

Harry didn't want to inconvenience the man, and was surprised no one had complained about all the noise in the late evening. "No Tom, nothing was your fault. I'll be back in a few hours, and was wondering if you could have a look at the bed while I'm gone. You'll see the problem. If you can fix it, then great. If not, then let me know. Either way I owe you some money for repairs."

Tom nodded a confused confirmation, and Harry left the muggle entrance for day two of his shopping spree.

Just like yesterday, Harry had a list of items he wanted to get while out, and the rest of the time he would spend browsing. The list was short compared to the items he needed in Diagon Alley, but was important nonetheless. The first thing Harry needed was a complete new wardrobe. After five years away for school, Harry was tired of trying to hide his fat cousin's old clothes, and wondered why he hadn't bought new muggle clothes before. He needed shirts, pants, shorts, underwear, shoes, sweaters, socks (that matched) and some clothes to sleep in.

The second and final item on Harry's list was to begin looking for a new place to live. Now that he could do magic, he had no intention of living at the Dursleys' much longer. Just a few weeks, till he learned how to properly protect himself. And living in the muggle world would be a lot safer than with other wizards. He could hide among the large population of London, and still be close to Diagon Alley and the wizarding world. Living in Surrey might be safer according to

Dumbledore, but it was a two hour car ride to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry hoped today to find someplace close by, so that he'd have access to both worlds.

So Harry set off down the street, keeping an eye open for men's stores that would have clothing his size. Harry had thought about going to a shopping mall, but was worried about getting carried away with the dozens of stores they had. There'd be time enough for that later, but right now Harry wanted to find a simple single store with nice enough clothing options. Luckily for him Charing Cross Road was in a popular shopping district, and Harry found a nice looking department store soon enough. The men's department was on the ground level, and had a lot of expensive looking clothes. Harry looked for a boys department, but there didn't seem to be any. "So I'll just have to do with this," Harry thought.

He was looking through a pile of knit sweaters a few moments later when a gentleman approached him and asked, "Is there something I can help you with young man? And please, try not to disrupt the display."

Not caring for the man's attitude, Harry replied that he was just browsing, and the man left with a grunt and disappeared around the corner.

"Sorry about my uncle," a girl said out of nowhere. "He did get me this job for the summer, but he's a bit mean."

Harry turned back to the sweater display to see who had spoken to him, and took in the young lady's appearance. She looked to be about twenty, with soft curls of blonde hair gently framing her face. She had light blue eyes of a color Harry knew was called corn silk, and they were very pleasant looking. Just a bit shorter than Harry, she wasn't overly thin, but by no means heavy either. She had a "feminine" body type that was very curvy and soft. She reminded Harry of a Hufflepuff, and he greeted "Becky" as her name tag identified her. Harry thought she'd be far more help than her mean spirited uncle.

"Don't worry about it," Harry replied, "he's got nothing on my uncle. Now, that man is a complete git."

The girl laughed in a cute way, and covered her mouth with both hands. "I wouldn't say something so bad about my uncle, but I know what you mean. We work off commission, and he probably didn't like your look, so left on purpose. Sorry about that."

Harry smiled and took out his new credit card to show the girl. "Then this is your lucky day. I need a complete wardrobe, and the only clothes I presently own are the rags I'm wearing. Money's no option, and I'll leave you to make all the decisions."

Harry figured Amber at Madam Malkin's had done such a good job with his robes, that he'd let this attendant pick out his news clothes as well. Becky's eyes opened wide as Harry spoke, and looked around the empty store before speaking to Harry again.

"Are you serious? A complete wardrobe?" At Harry's nod, she smiled, but then frowned as realization hit her. "I'll have to go get my uncle then. He handles all the large accounts." Harry assured her that he would refuse her uncle's help and would walk out the store if she went to get him. So, what was a girl to do? She began to giggle again, and Harry smiled back at her as she ran to grab a measuring tape to begin work.

Much like at Madam Malkin's, Harry stood still while the girl took his measurements, but this time neither of them blushed. Becky was very professional, and set Harry at ease. He described the types of clothes and colors he was interested in, but also told Becky she could experiment a little if she wanted. After ten minutes of discussion, she left to go pick out some outfits while Harry sat in a nice armchair and enjoyed some complimentary tea. It wasn't the breakfast tea he was used to, but something a bit more exotic. Harry searched through the drawers on the tea service cart to find the tea box, and the blend was identified as "Mutan White Tea." Harry filed the reference for future use; he really enjoyed it. It was another ten minutes before Becky came back with an armful of clothes, and set about organizing the piles in the private dressing room Harry occupied.

More than two hours later Harry tried on the last piece of clothing Becky had picked out for him. It was a black leather jacket, which had a satin stitched interior that felt good to the touch. It wasn't anything like what motorcycle riders would wear, but looked more like a fashion model's jacket. Harry liked it, and it was the first real jacket he'd owned. Not even Dudley's cast offs had been poor enough for Harry to wear in the past, and during the cold winter months he'd been forced to layer up with as many shirts and jumpers as he could find.

In the end Harry had ended up with clothes enough for two people, and Becky had ended with a commission rich enough to last her the rest of the month. Harry had bought five pairs of jeans. The ones he liked were baggy and comfortable. The ones Becky liked were straight cut and tapered. Four pairs of corduroys were added to the pants pile, and another four pairs of assorted khakis. Although he didn't know if he'd ever need them, Becky also convinced him to buy a few pairs of dress slacks, made of a wool blend. She said he could wear them if he ever went out on a date, and Harry had laughed at her. She didn't know about his dating history, or she would have suggested a waterproof option.

Harry only bought a few tee shirts, all in assorted colors, because Becky said he was too old to be wearing them daily. He also bought five tank tops to workout in. He'd be taking up running and other exercises that summer, and needed some workout clothes. Most of the shirts he purchased were button up long sleeved, but he also had a few solid colored polos. His favorite shirt by far was corduroy, vertically striped in different earth tones, and had beige patches on the elbows. It was a heavyweight shirt, but looked wicked with a pair of dark jeans.

Two sweatshirts, and a few sweaters were added, but none had the personal flavor of the Weasley family jumper he got every Christmas, so Harry only bought a minimal amount. He also got a light windbreaker, and a heavier cloth jacket that was water resistant. It wasn't a true raincoat, but it would do.

Becky smiled at Harry when she asked him, "Boxers or Briefs?" and he laughed back when he answered boxers. Becky didn't stay in the

room when Harry held these up to him in front of the mirror, but they looked the right size, so he took fourteen pair. Becky insisted that half be made of silk. Harry didn't know what the difference was, so just shrugged his shoulders.

Harry had never been much of a shorts man, because he liked to hide his bony legs, but he had to get some for workout purposes. The five he bought were a light nylon material, and had zipped pockets so items wouldn't fall out while exercising. He also got two pair of sweatpants for when the weather turned colder.

The sleepwear Becky brought to Harry he liked immediately. They were solid silk pajamas, all long sleeved, and they all fit comfortably. Harry picked out a green, crimson, and black pair.

He'd never owned a proper pair of shoes before, also being Dudley's old things, so Harry treated himself with his footwear. He bought two pairs of sneakers, one for training and one for whenever. A pair of hiking boots he got for when the snow fell, because they were waterproof. Two pairs of dress shoes, a fuzzy pair of slippers, three pairs of loafers, and a comfortable pair of Birkenstocks later, and Harry's feet were looking good.

A few belts, an assortment of socks, and a few odds and ends later, Harry had all his purchases packed up and ready to go. They took up seven huge bags, and had cost over 3,000 pounds (750 galleons), but Harry finally had some clothes of his own to wear. He told Becky to burn the ones he'd worn in, and stepped out of the dressing room in a pair of jeans and a blue polo shirt, wearing his Birks. Becky thanked Harry for giving her the sale instead of her uncle, and Harry told her he only hoped her uncle had learned a lesson in how to treat people.

Before he exited the store Harry ducked into a bathroom, and added his purchases to his tiny trunk. These went into the second compartment, because he didn't feel like cramming them into the first. Once the trunk returned to its small size, Harry slipped it into a back pocket, and it looked like a pack of cigarettes. With the first of two chores done already, Harry set out once again to find a new place to live.

The next two hours Harry had spent wondering around London, never straying too far from Charing Cross Road. He asked a few people on the street if they knew of a nearby residential area, but Harry got little help. Lunch time approached in no time, and Harry found a Fish & Chips shop on a nearby street corner. He still had a few coins and single pound notes left from yesterday morning, and spent the rest of his money on lunch. Harry ordered a double portion, and dashed a liberal amount of malt vinegar into his newspaper cone. It had been years since Harry had had the greasy food, and he promised himself he'd talk to Hogwarts' house elves about adding it to the school menu. That thought brought forth a whole new idea which was even better, and Harry decided to send out a letter to Dobby later. If his new thought worked out for him, Harry would have a much easier summer than he thought.

The man working the fish counter had told Harry of a new apartment building that was opening a few streets away, so that's where Harry set off for after he tossed the greasy newspaper in a trash bin. A few streets turned out to be seven, a bit farther than he would have liked, but it didn't matter. There was a tube entrance less than a block away from the apartment building, so Harry figured that would make up for the extra distance.

The apartment building was four weeks away from completion, according to a construction sign. There was a manager working the lower office to show off models, but no units were available for rent yet. Harry thought he'd look anyways, as he was already there. Besides, Harry had already promised himself he'd spend a few weeks living at the Dursley's until he learned some protective magic.

The woman manager was alone in her office when Harry entered. He asked about the apartments available and if he could see one. The manager gave the young boy the odd look Harry had come to love, and led the way to the single elevator. The finished floor, the second, was the floor with the completed models on them. The woman explained that the middle levels weren't decorated yet, and the topmost levels were still stripped down to the studs. It was as the lady went to push the second floor elevator button that Harry had a brilliant

idea. He wanted to think about it some more, so Harry pushed it into the back of his mind.

The apartment tour was rather quick, as Harry mostly ignored the woman, and she became rather impatient with him. It ended up being a nice three bedroom/two bath living space, but Harry had other things on his mind. The idea he'd had in the lift was growing out of control, and Harry couldn't help but laugh at how perfect it would be if it all worked out. A quick lift ride down to the first floor, and Harry almost ran from the building looking for a quiet place to sit and think.

It was pure luck that Harry had liked the first place he'd been shown. He had no real idea what type of place he expected to find, or how much he'd have to pay rent, but it didn't matter now. The idea Harry had had would let him live rent free if he could figure out the logistics.

You see, while in the lift, Harry had noticed the elevator buttons were numbered one through twenty one; one button for each floor of the building. At first Harry didn't notice it, but soon enough he remembered that his uncle's office building had a lift different than this one. His uncle's office building had one less button inside the elevator. The button for the thirteenth floor was missing.

You see, an old superstition caused a lot of builders to skip over the thirteenth floor. That's why many old office buildings and apartment complexes, like the one Grunnings was in, purposely labeled the thirteenth floor fourteen, and skipped over that number in the elevator. It was thought to be unlucky to live on the thirteenth floor, so people for years just called it the fourteenth. In fact, there are buildings all over the world that are actually one floor shorter than people actually think.

But Harry had noticed that this building, because it's so new, didn't skip over the thirteenth floor in the lift. And the only person who knew about it was the apartment manager! There were no tenants yet, and the builders would soon leave, so who else was to know? If Harry could somehow figure out how to hide the thirteenth floor, and then memory charm the apartment manager, he could have the whole floor to himself! And no one would be suspicious that the lift skipped over the thirteenth floor, because it was such common practice!

Harry smiled as he walked back towards the Leaky Cauldron. It was a brilliant idea, but would take a lot of planning, and some serious use of magic. If the building opened in four weeks, Harry would want to be moved in beforehand, so as not to take any chances. If he studied hard, and used the time tuner the way he'd planned, Harry would have over two months to study before he would have to move. "Two months to wipe a few memories and hide an entire floor," Harry thought. "Piece of cake!"

Harry hurried back quickly. He made just three more stops before reaching the muggle entrance to the Leaky Cauldron.

The first stop was in a hair salon, where he paid someone sixteen pounds to tell him his hair was hopeless. The only way to prevent it from sticking up was either to shave it all off, or grow his hair out long, and tie it back. Since Harry had time to think about it, he left it the way it was, naturally unruly, and left the store.

The second stop he made was in a gym he passed by with large glass windows. He pretended like he was inquiring about a membership, and a personal trainer showed him around. The trainer spent an hour showing Harry what each piece of equipment did, and how to correctly work each muscle group. He also explained the difference between working up muscle mass, and toning and strengthening muscles for endurance and flexibility. It was all very interesting to Harry, and he thought he might be able to use the information to get into better shape in time for Quidditch season.

That was, if the life long ban on him was ever lifted. The thought of Quidditch and Umbridge only reminded Harry that his Firebolt was still missing, and he'd either have to get it back or replace it. The broomstick was very important to Harry, because it had been a gift from Sirius, and Harry decided to get it back at all costs. He even decided to buy a replacement broom anyways, because he didn't feel like using Sirius' present ever again. If it broke, like his Nimbus had, Harry would never forgive himself.

The third and final store Harry entered before the Leaky Cauldron was a large sporting goods store. In true Slytherin fashion, Harry had

decided to purchase some weight equipment so he could train himself. He'd already planned on it when he went to the gym a few moments ago to get some tips of working out. That way he didn't have to pay the high membership rates of a fitness club, and he could workout whenever he felt like. He picked out two machines, and some free weights. The first machine was multi-purpose, and had adjustable weights up to three hundred pounds able to work a variety of muscle groups. Harry also purchased a treadmill, of the non-electrical variety. The treadmill would most certainly be placed in his magic trunk, and Harry knew that electronics didn't work in the magical atmosphere of Hogwarts. The model wasn't too advanced being a manual treadmill, but all Harry really needed it for was running. Especially in the winter months, there would be no way that Harry could run around the castle grounds.

After paying for the purchases with his credit card, and filling out a form to have them delivered to the Dursley's the next afternoon, Harry walked out into the street and soon crossed into the seedy tavern he was so fond of. Immediately people turned to look at him, and started to whisper.

"Damn!" Harry inwardly swore. He'd thrown away the ski cap that had been hiding his scar the past two days, and he'd changed his eyes back to their natural color when he went clothes shopping. And now he was in plain view of at least thirty witches and wizards, all who would know he'd been in Diagon Alley now. This somewhat ruined Harry's plans.

Harry continued to berate himself as he made his way over to Tom. Harry decided to do the short business he had in Diagon Alley as quickly as possible, and then return home.

"Hey Tom. I'm sorry but I won't be staying tonight like I thought I would. Hope that's not a problem. Any luck with the bed?" Harry was still the center of attention, and wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"Harry, yes, the bed," Tom replied. "For the life of me I can't figure out what happened. All my beds are fireproof, it's the law you see. I can't imagine what could have been hot enough to burn through the fireproofing charms."

Harry decided to play dumb. "I don't know. When I came back late last night, the bed was already like that. I was so tired I just slept on the floor using my robes as a pillow."

"Don't matter much Harry. The bed's already been replaced, just can't figure out what happened. And don't worry about not staying tonight; you'll just have to make up for it some other time. Anything else I can do for you?"

Harry was about to say no, but then picked up two cases of butterbeer bottles to add to his trunk. They might be a nice little treat for later. Harry paid Tom and left, once again stepping into the back alleyway which led to Diagon Alley.

It wasn't yet three o'clock, so Harry couldn't pick up his robes at Madam Malkin's. Deciding to kill some time, he returned to Gringotts and personally requested Griphook. The goblin had been so helpful yesterday; Harry wanted to keep him around.

Griphook was pleased to see Harry again, and the bank managers were impressed that Harry Potter had specifically asked for an employee. Harry gave the manager a good word, saying that Griphook had been most helpful in the past. A few seconds later, they entered a mine cart and took off.

The bank manager had no idea that Harry wasn't heading for Vault 1295, but vault number thirty seven instead. Harry still didn't have much time to carefully look around, but he did add all the books he found to his magic trunk. He'd sort through them later; he just wanted access to them now. Harry also thought about taking some of the weapons or furniture, but decided not to. He already had a dagger to use, and had no place for all the furniture yet.

After another visit to the Muggle Exchange desk, this time for some cash, Harry left Gringotts with still about ten minutes to three. With more time to kill, Harry headed to the one shop he had purposely skipped the day before. He hadn't had a plan then, but after the events of last night, Harry thought he might not need one.

Harry entered the dusty shop, with the single wand box on an old and torn purple pillow, and a small bell rang as the door closed behind him. The shop was identical to the way it looked five years ago.

“Ahhh, Mr. Potter. To what do I owe the please of your visit? Nothing wrong with you wand I hope?” Mr. Ollivander was just as creepy as ever.

“No sir, my wand’s fine,” Harry replied.

“Yes, it is,” he stated. “Holly wood with a particularly strong phoenix feather, eleven inches I believe. Are you interested in some wand polish perhaps then?”

“No, I actually came on another matter. I know it’s not legal, but I need another wand.” Harry had decided to be as blunt as possible in speaking with the ancient man. He’d also try to use his celebrity status if he could; it seemed to work fine the day before.

“Why Mr. Potter,” Mr. Ollivander asked, “would you need another wand if you still have your original?”

“Because of its brother wand; because of Voldemort,” Harry answered and watched the man flinch at Voldemort’s name, but Mr. Ollivander nodded an understanding.

“Tell me sir,” Harry continued, “were you ever told about the events of last June concerning our two wands.

Mr. Ollivander’s eyes lit as he answered in the negative. He might not be comfortable talking about Voldemort, but Ollivander was a lifelong student of wand making, and wanted to hear about the two brother wands meeting.

So Harry told him. It was an abbreviated version of the story that glanced over Cedric’s death and didn’t name any of the Death Eaters, but Harry was sure to include every detail he could remember about Voldemort’s duel. Harry told about the spells connecting, and the golden cage that formed around them. Harry told the old man about the phoenix song, and how he and Voldemort were lifted off the

ground as they fought for control over the other. And Harry told about how he'd forced the beads of light into Voldemort's wand, and how it regurgitated the last few spells cast by it.

Twenty minutes later when Harry was done with his tale, Ollivander's eyes were glazed with amazement. He was an old man, and even now only rarely left his shop to procure new wand cores. Most of his time was spent cataloging his current supply, and selling wands to eager young children on their way to Hogwarts. That's why Ollivander enjoyed the tale so much. Because not only did it focus on two wands of his making, but it was quite an exciting tale by itself.

"So that's why I need another wand, you see," Harry explained. "I've met Voldemort four times already, and I can't defend myself against him properly. Next time we meet, I want to have a surprise waiting."

Mr. Ollivander paused and thought about Harry's request for awhile. If he said no, then Harry didn't know what he would do. Luckily Ollivander answered in the affirmative.

"All right Mr. Potter, I'll let you purchase a new wand, but only because you'll have to use it against You-Know-Who." He continued, "The problem is finding another suitable wand. I remember you being a very tricky customer, and the phoenix that provided your wand core did not donate a third feather. It may take some time to find a suitable replacement, and even then it might not work as well."

Harry had already though about this. "Actually sir, I was wondering if I could provide my own wand core?"

Ollivander seemed surprised at the request, as he'd not often been asked to custom make a wand. "I suppose you could Mr. Potter, but it would be extremely difficult to get your hands on suitable core material. I only work with unicorn hairs, dragon heartstrings, and phoenix tail feathers, and each of those creatures are most difficult to find. Basilisk fangs, griffin fur, and wyvern scales I don't even try to procure. Basilisks are much too dangerous, and griffins and wyverns are almost extinct, and live on other continents. Most other magical creatures aren't nearly powerful enough to make decent wands from. I think you'll have better luck just sampling some of my wands."

Harry smiled to himself. "Want to bet," he told Ollivander. "Hedwig, are you around?"

A short second later, in a burst of white and golden flames, Hedwig appeared out of thin air and alighted on Harry's shoulder. Harry petted his girl under her chin, and smiled at the astounded look on Mr. Ollivander's face. "Would a phoenix feather do?"

It took a second for Mr. Ollivander to remember to close his mouth, but he got it working soon after. "Mr. Potter, where did she come from? I've never seen a white phoenix before? And I've seen my fair share of them."

"She's been nearby," Harry informed Ollivander, "and she's rather new in the neighborhood. I don't want to say too much yet, but I'm pretty sure she'd be willing to donate a tail feather." Harry addressed Hedwig now. "How about it girl, would you help me out?"

Hedwig simply nodded and rose off Harry's shoulder. She flapped her wings and hovered for a moment, and then shook her lower body until a tail feather came loose and fluttered to the shop counter. The feather was about seven inches long, and was colored not just a solid red, like Fawkes', but was red and gold together.

"Thank you girl. I'll have to treat you to something special," Harry praised his friend.

Mr. Ollivander at this point had picked up the tail feather and was now studying it closely. If he wasn't shocked before, he most certainly was now.

"Mr. Potter! Do you know how young this phoenix is? In all my years, I've never seen such a young specimen! I'd say she's only a few years old, maybe not more than ten!"

Harry, not being a wand maker himself, didn't know how Mr. Ollivander knew Hedwig was a young phoenix, nor did he know why it was such a big deal that she was. So he asked Mr. Ollivander why he was so excited.

"You see Mr. Potter," he explained, "the area around the quick of the feather has certain markings that tell the age of the phoenix; like rings on a rattlesnake. And the younger a phoenix is, the more powerful the wand core its feather makes. It's for the same reason multiple feathers given by the same bird lessen a wand's power. You see, all feathers of a phoenix are tied to its life force. And at such a young age, that force is naturally extremely powerful. And multiple feathers would have to share the phoenix's life force. That's why your wand is so powerful and unusual Mr. Potter. It only has one brother wand, where most phoenixes who donate feathers for wands usually give at least five."

"Well," Harry couldn't help but laugh as he told the man information that he expected would give him a heart attack, "you'll be happy to know then that Hedwig here has never given another feather before, and she's less than a day old to boot."

As if to rub in the fact, Hedwig nodded in agreement and let out a short trill.

And as if in astonishment, old man Ollivander keeled over and slumped into a chair.

He didn't faint per se, but he did start to hyperventilate and shake uncontrollably. Harry asked if he was all right, and got a trembling answer that "yes he was," Ollivander just needed a minute.

In the end Ollivander agreed to make Harry his new wand. He was about to suggest different wood types, but decided to stick with Holly. The combination had worked once before, so it would probably work again. Ollivander informed him it would take a week to craft the wand, and that he would owl it to Harry when it was completed. When Harry asked the price, Ollivander just shook his head.

"I wouldn't dream of charging you to be able to work with such a specimen. If you insist, you could just cover the cost of the wood, but that's not really important. I would like to ask however, if I would be able to have another feather from your beautiful phoenix. She's such

a powerful bird; I'd love to craft another wand." Harry didn't blame Ollivander in his request.

But he wouldn't grant it either. If it was true about a wand's powers lessening when the core creature gave more than one feather, Harry couldn't take that chance.

"I'm sorry Mr. Ollivander, but I can't grant you that. I'm sure you understand, but I need all the power I can get in preparing for my fight." Ollivander nodded an understanding. "I may be able to provide you with something else however. Tell me, if a basilisk was deceased for a few years, would the fangs still be viable as a wand core?"

Ollivander's ears perked up at this, and started to breath heavy again. "Yes they would Mr. Potter. It's the actual venom that resides within each fang that provides the magical focus. The fangs are ground into a powder, and then heated until liquid, and poured into the wand chamber. As the teeth aren't living cells, they shouldn't be affected by death. Why do you ask though? There hasn't been a known dead basilisk for almost thirty years."

Harry laughed. "Again Mr. Ollivander, I regret to inform you that you've missed out on another of my stories. In my second year, I fought and killed a basilisk. A bloody big one too. The body should still be there, and I might be able to send you the fangs."

Ollivander was a giddy as a schoolgirl. "Really? Where is it? How did it not kill you? Second year you say?"

Harry was amused by the old man's curiosity. However, he had to be going on his way. "Mr. Ollivander, I'm afraid I don't have time for another story. How about this though? You make my new wand free of charge. I'd also like you to provide a new wand to Neville Longbottom later this summer when he comes in for a replacement, at no cost. His broke last week. In return, I'll send the basilisk fangs to you when I can, and I promise to come back and tell you another exciting story. How about it?"

"DEAL!"

And so Harry exited Ollivander's shop at half past three, on his way to Madam Malkin's to pick up his altered robes. Hedwig had disappeared in another burst of flames, so she wouldn't draw attention to Harry. He wanted to return home quickly before the press arrived, but still decided to make one more unscheduled stop. He had decided earlier that morning to replace his Firebolt, and there was only one place to buy a new broomstick. Quality Quidditch Supplies.

"Hello!" Harry greeted the salesperson. "I recently lost my Firebolt, and would like to buy a replacement before Quidditch season starts back up at school. Do you happen to know if it's still the top model?"

The salesperson behind the counter hadn't even looked up yet. He was reading some random Quidditch magazine, and was only half listening to Harry's question. "Yeah, Firebolt's still top model. Don't know what you're talking about though, only kid who's got a Firebolt is Harry Potter."

Harry smiled. The man obviously didn't look up to see who he was talking to. "So you've heard of me then. Pleased to meet you." Harry gave a short wave.

The sales clerk didn't respond at first, then looked over the edge of the magazine, and said, "Blimey! You are Harry Potter! Wow!"

After assuring the man that he was who he said he was, and answering a few light questions about playing as a seeker, Harry finally convinced the man to go back to talking about broomsticks.

"Yes, the Firebolt's still the top model, although the price had come down a bit in the past year. It now only cost eleven hundred twenty three galleons, sixteen sickles." The man assured Harry.

Harry couldn't believe that the price was that expensive. What was it last year? And what did Sirius spend on his two years ago?

"If you're looking to replace your old one, it'll be no problem." The salesperson continued. "We've only sold five this past year, and have a few more in stock. But I think the boss might be able to do you one better. Interested?"

Harry said yes, expecting perhaps a discount or another type of offer like he'd been getting the past few days. The sales clerk led Harry to a side staircase, and up it into a large flat that was located above the Quidditch store.

"The boss lives here," the man told Harry, "he owns the whole building. He's been working on something, something very hush hush. Wait here a minute and let me go talk to him."

Harry nodded, and was directed to a soft couch in the waiting room. The sales clerk disappeared into another room. Harry waited patiently, and looked around the room, taking in all the magical portraits and Quidditch memorabilia. He occasionally heard a few strained words coming from the other room, and what he heard sounded promising.

"He's here?" One voice yelled.

".....thought....seeker....new....," another voice answered.

"Perfect!wonder if....performance....one year....," The first voice said.

The voices became whispers after that, and Harry studied his new watch as he waited for someone to come out and tell him what was going on.

After about five minutes, that happened. Both the salesperson and apparent owner came out of the other room, and headed towards Harry. The salesperson smiled at him and shouted out a "Good Luck," then returned down the stairs. The manager sat in a chair to face Harry.

The manager was a normal enough looking wizard. You could tell he once played Quidditch, because he had wide muscular shoulders and bulging forearms. There was a bit of a pot belly that came with middle age, and he had an overall cheery disposition. In fact, he reminded Harry of lot of Ludo Bagman.

"Hello there Mr. Potter! It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Walter Whigman, but please just call me Walt. I own the Quidditch store downstairs." He seemed nice enough.

So Harry replied, also in a friendly tone. "Nice to meet you Walt, I'm a big fan of your store. And please, just Harry is fine."

"Harry then," he agreed, "great! My associate just told me that you were looking to purchase a new Firebolt, something about your other one gone missing. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Harry answered, "it got confiscated last year, and I don't know where it is. I hope to be able to play Quidditch again this season, and need a new ride. Why, is there a problem?"

The manager laughed, "No, no problem at all. In fact, I'm fairly excited about what I'm about to say. Tell me Mr. Potter, do you have any idea what a top of the line Nimbus or Firebolt cost?"

"I have a rough idea. It's a lot," Harry said.

"Correct Harry! And because of that fact, not many people can afford them. In fact, besides professional Quidditch players, I believe you're only one of three people that actually own a Firebolt. The broomstick companies like to be exclusive, and they usually keep the price of a new model broomstick very high for the first few years after they've been released. Now, Harry. Can I ask you to keep a secret?"

Sure, why not Harry thought. "Okay."

"Great!" The man was getting really excited now. "Because the Nimbus and Firebolt companies are so greedy, and I have such a love of the game, I've been working on my own broomstick designs. Eventually I plan to have a complete line of four broomsticks; one specialized for each Quidditch position. You see, I'm tired of always selling other people's merchandise. If my broomsticks work out, I plan on selling them at a fair price, lower than what the current model Nimbus costs now.

"Now, I've already mostly finished two of the brooms. The first is for beater position; my old stomping grounds. I have a friend on Pride of Portee who'll be testing out the prototype during the team's Quidditch practice. He agreed to write a few reports on how the broom handles, that way I can make a few tiny corrections before I go into production. The team promised to keep the broom a secret, and won't be using it for actual games because it hasn't been approved for play by the league committee yet." Walt sure was excited about his broomsticks.

"And what's the second broom?" Harry asked.

"Ahhh, that's where you come in Mr. Potter." Here we go again, Harry thought. "The second completed broom is for your position; seeker. I was going to have another friend on the Harpies test it for me, but then you go and walk into my store. I dare say that the great Harry Potter is one of the best seekers around, and my sales assistant had a brilliant idea. He suggested that I let you use my prototype for this year's Quidditch matches, and that perhaps you might do something for me in return."

Harry was interested in getting a new broom, and having an unheard of model might be a great advantage over Malfoy and the other seekers, but Harry was wary about the crazed look in Walt's eye. "What did you have in mind Walt?"

"Well, my assistant pictured this actually. You can have the broom for this year, and test it out like normal. I'll expect a report on its performance after every one of your Quidditch matches. And when I finally go into production, either next summer or in time for the holidays, I'd like you to promote the broom. Nothing too much, just say a few words about how much you enjoy it and maybe a few pictures. That way I can publish your interview in the Daily Prophet, and along with my low prices, I'll be running the competition out of town! I'll even throw in another broom once the design's been finished and it's properly labeled. So what do you think?"

Harry thought about it. He had no idea how the broomstick performed, but it couldn't hurt to try it out. If he didn't like the broom, Harry could always trade it in later. So why not?

"Okay Mr. Whigman, you've got a deal. On a few conditions though." Harry wanted to make sure he was crystal clear. "If I don't like how the broom handles, I'll be returning it. I also don't like publicity much, so I'll only do a few interviews and photos. And I don't want my picture, or a huge lightning bolt, or anything else like that on the broom's box. I'll just endorse your product, not be its spokesperson."

Walt tried to talk him into a few more photo-ops than Harry had wanted to do, but eventually gave in to Harry's conditions. The broom would be delivered by owl within a week, as Whigman didn't have the prototype ready yet, and wanted to make a few minor adjustments.

"So what can you tell me about the broom?" Harry inquired.

"Well," Walt replied, "I don't have a name for it yet if that's what you mean, but I have come up with a few ideas I like. Anyway, it's a bit like the Firebolt, only with a few alterations. It's lighter than a Firebolt, and has a higher maximum velocity by about twenty five miles per hour. It turns much easier to get out of steep dives, and has quicker response times. The downside is that it's nowhere near as flashy as the Firebolt. Its broom handle right now is just ordinary sanded wood, no diamond polish or anything glitzy. The broom is also lighter than the Firebolt, so if you get hit by a bludger or another person, you might fly off track a bit easier. And I couldn't get the instantaneous braking charms right. At maximum speeds, my broom needs about ten feet to fully stop. I'm hoping the cheaper prices will appeal to the Firebolt's normal market. But that's not the best part. Tell me, what a seeker's most popular injury?"

Harry thought about it, and remembered all his trips to the Hospital Wing. "Broken bones I guess, I tend to crash a lot."

Walt nodded. "Exactly! Seekers are constantly running into the ground or obstacles because of feints or losing control of their broomsticks. And do you have any idea how many brooms are damaged or broken entirely because of it?" Harry nodded, reminded of his shattered Nimbus 2000. "That's why all my brooms have a built in repair charm. It's never been done before because other brooms are too fancy, and it's hard to repair a top quality broomstick. You see, diamond hardening polish and magical finishes interfere with a

standard repair spell. But since I left my broom handle alone; it can repair itself as easily as anything else.”

Whigman went on for another few moments about the broom’s capabilities, and by the time Harry left the store, he was very excited about trying out his new broomstick. Checking his wristwatch, Harry saw the time was now a bit past four o’clock, and his robes would most certainly be finished.

Amber was in Madam Malkin’s again, as was the older witch who was working the day before, and Madam Malkin herself. Since Harry was not in disguise this time, he was accosted by all three women.

The two older witches started to measure and greet him immediately, and Amber just giggled and waved at him from a distance. Harry brushed the two witches off, saying he’d already been measured and fitted for new robes the day before. Amber took his purchases out from behind the counter and walked over to save Harry from all the attention he was getting. He finally managed to back into a corner, away from the other customers and shopkeepers.

“Now I see why you were in disguise yesterday,” Amber smiled.

“Yes,” Harry agreed, “I do seem to have the habit of drawing attention to myself. I hope you don’t get into trouble because you helped keep my secret.”

Amber smiled. “Oh, don’t worry. In the end, as long as Madam Malkin makes the sale, she won’t care. Now Gretta on the other hand, she’ll be upset that she missed out on some gossip.”

Harry laughed as he realized his suspicions about the horse faced woman were true. Amber handed him the three large bags, and Harry withdrew the correct amount of money from his money pouch. His business done, Harry made to leave, but was still backed into a corner, blocked by Amber who had a nervous looking face.

“Harry,” she began. Amber was looking at the floor and wringing her hands. “I hope you don’t mind, but I included my floo address in one

of your bags. I was hoping maybe we could go out sometime. If you're not doing anything that is."

Harry could tell Amber was extremely nervous. In fact, she looked almost like Harry did a few years ago when he had asked Cho to go to the Yule Ball with him. Harry felt kind of good knowing that he had made her nervous in that way, but then became nervous himself when he realized he would have to form an answer.

"Er, ahh, I'd really love to Amber." She looked up at him with a huge smile. But it quickly faded. "It's just that I won't be around much this summer, and I don't know how much free time I'll have."

Harry thought about another possibility as well. This one wasn't so new, it was just an extension of the danger his friends already suffered from. "Besides, I wouldn't want to put you into any danger. I'm sure you know some bad people are after me, and if they found out I was dating, it wouldn't be too good for that person." Amber looked crestfallen, and didn't seem to understand Death Eaters would be after her if they were so much as seen in public together. Harry had to make her feel better somehow.

"You're real pretty and everything, and I like you a lot, it's just not the best time for me. But I promise to stop in and see you if I'm in Diagon Alley again this summer. How's that?"

That cheered up Amber considerably, and Harry thought it might be nice to have another friend he could visit. He'd just have to be careful.

With a quick wave goodbye, skipping the kiss on the check this time, Harry left Amber smiling at the counter. Once outside the store, Harry remembered his new vision enhancement options, and an evil grin crept on his face.

Still standing outside the robes shop, Harry pretended to look at the store's sign about business hours. Closing his right eye, he concentrated on looking past the wooden sign. Slowly images formed, and Harry could begin to make out the dress shop behind. He spotted Amber, and began to focus on her as well.

Harry didn't want to abuse his gift. The witch at the glasses shop had warned him, and Harry even felt a little guilty about what he was doing. After all, Harry had a good set of morals, not like some wizards he knew. But as he focused on Amber, and saw what she was wearing, or rather wasn't wearing under her robes, Harry decided he'd have to learn to get over his guilt real fast. "Damn," Harry muttered under his breath as he walked away, "I just passed up a chance to date a hot older girl. Maybe I'll have to come back and visit her after all."

Harry soon entered the Leaky Cauldron, exchanged a quick conversation with Tom over a mug of butterbeer (man that stuff is good), and thought about the conversation he'd be having that afternoon with the Dursleys. Now that he was able to do magic, Harry could just hex the hell out of them. God knows they deserved it. But Harry reasoned that if he showed them that he wouldn't use magic against them, and that it could even be beneficial for them, then the Dursleys might leave Harry well enough alone for the rest of the summer.

Two hours later, and seventy pounds lighter, Harry waved to the cab driver that had driven him home and stepped towards the front door of number four Privet Drive. And Harry had his wand drawn...

AUTHOR NOTES:

See, I couldn't really kill Hedwig. I just had to tease everyone a little. I've always liked the idea of Harry having a phoenix, but another bird would just make Hedwig obsolete. Besides, no one really knows where phoenixes come from. I've read a ton of fanfic stories that have them hatching from eggs, but who knows? They're creatures dedicated to the light, so why couldn't they be reborn from other animals that die in a dark manner. Plus Harry is the embodiment of the light, fighting against Volody, the embodiment of the dark. Who deserves a phoenix more than Harry? The only thing we really know about phoenixes is that they're "reborn from the ashes." So I wrote a story to incorporate that one known fact. Please tell me what you think. Do all of you like Hedwig as a phoenix? And how many of you picked up my hint in chapter 4? Remember the white phoenix on the back of Harry's dress robe? And just so you know, there really are many buildings out there with no floor 13. It should be easy to guess

how Harry's going to hide it. A quick note on those that say Harry hasn't grieved enough over Sirius. He spent a whole week doing that, and then pushed his feelings aside. They're not gone, and we saw them creep out with the tattoos. Don't worry, we'll see some more emotional Harry, just not a whinny cry baby Harry. I hate that Harry. Next chapter, Harry confronts the Dursleys and unpacks his trunk. After that training starts, and I promised you won't be disappointed.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

RossChapter 7 – Not a Cosby Family Reunion

Harry did have his wand drawn, but not because he wanted to hurt the Dursleys. He just wanted to be able to intimidate them. And after their experience with Hagrid all those years ago, the Dursleys were deathly afraid of the idea of magic being used against them.

With that thought in mind, Harry approached the front door and went to open it, but it was locked. ‘Stupid me,’ thought Harry, ‘Uncle Vernon’s at work, and Aunt Petunia must be out somewhere treating her Duddykins to a six scoop ice cream cone or something. And of course they’d try to lock me out.’

Harry was actually glad that the Dursleys weren’t at home yet, because now he had time to prepare for their arrival. In the past when the Dursleys locked him out of the house, they expected Harry to sit in the back yard till they got home. Harry didn’t have to do that anymore. So with a quick unlocking spell, Harry was inside and had the door shut behind him.

The first thing Harry did was go upstairs to his room and enlarged his trunk. It was placed next to his old battered school trunk, and looked even better then before by comparison. The two trunks, and Hedwig’s

old owl cage, were the only things Harry owned in the world at that moment. Not for much longer though.

As if she knew that Harry was thinking about her, Hedwig picked that moment to appear in another burst of white and golden flames. Normally she would have flown into her cage to have a drink of water, but she just gave it a look of disgust as she landed on Harry's shoulder.

"I suppose we'll have to get rid of your owl cage, huh Hedwig?" Harry asked his brilliant phoenix.

She nodded and trilled in agreement. Hedwig had always been a bit pompous for an owl, and as a phoenix she was turning out to be even more so. Not that Harry minded.

"Ok then girl, let's see what I can do with it." Harry turned his attention to the cage and pointed his wand at it. "It shouldn't be too hard to transfigure, it's only metal."

Harry had an idea in mind of what to turn her cage into. Phoenixes' needed a special kind of perch that had an under tray, to catch their ashes on burning days. Harry had seen Fawkes go through a burning twice before, and knew it could be messy. So Harry pictured the grand looking perch that Fawkes had in Dumbledore's office, and attempted to transfigure Hedwig's cage into something similar. It took more than one attempt, but three minutes later Hedwig now had a brand new stand to perch upon. It wasn't as fancy as the one Fawkes used, but he promised Hedwig he'd work on his skills until he got better.

"As soon as I learn how to transfigure items into jewels, you'll be the first to know." Hedwig was quite happy with Harry's last statement, even though that level of transfiguration was impossible.

Harry then turned to some of his belongings, and noticed that he and Hedwig weren't alone in the room. Sitting patiently on his desk, with a parchment roll tied to its foot, was a tiny grey owl almost as small as Pig was. Upon finally being noticed, the owl raised its foot towards Harry so he could remove the letter.

"Well, you may be as small as Pig is," Harry thanked the owl, "but you're certainly better trained."

The parchment Harry noticed was closed with a blue wax seal, which Harry had only seen a few times before. It was a personal letter from Dumbledore; not the standard Hogwarts stationary Harry was accustomed to. He knew that something like this would happen, so Harry opened the letter to read exactly what he was expecting.

Dear Harry,

I'm writing this letter in hopes that you will return safely home, and that myself and the Order are not becoming too frantic. It seems that you have managed somehow to slip past our security, and I cannot imagine why. I know that you still must be upset about the events that have happened these past few weeks, but I thought that by now you would have calmed down some since our last meeting.

Please remember that the Order is only trying to protect you, as it has been doing for an entire year now. I know you don't feel you need the extra security, but the Dementor attack against you and your cousin last summer prove that isn't so. Please do not give any Order members you encounter a hard time, as they're only doing their jobs.

As I write this letter, several of us are out looking for you. Including one very angry potions master, I might add. We know you weren't attacked or kidnapped, because no dark magic was detected outside your residence, and your father's invisibility cloak was found missing among your possessions. My only hope is that you return soon, and safely, to find this letter.

When you do, please reply immediately, and I think an explanation of where you've been is in order. If not for my sake, than for Mrs. Weasley's, who believes your muggle relatives have done something awful to you. I know that is not the case, but for some reason she's convinced the Dursleys are at fault.

We won't be stopping our search until the Order either finds you or receives your reply, so please do it as quickly as possible. For your

sake, I hope you happen upon this letter before Professor Snape finds you.

Sincerely, with regards to your safety,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster of Hogwarts Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry had expected the Order to notice he was missing, but he didn't think Dumbledore would mobilize all the members to hunt him down. Nor did he think they would search through his private belongings, and that just pissed Harry off. He only hoped it was Moody or Tonks who went through his trunk, and not Snape. Snape would just love to happen across an old letter or something that he could try to embarrass Harry with.

He knew he should reply to the letter soon to calm everyone down, but didn't have time for it right now. He wanted to be ready and waiting for his family when they came home, so the letter would have to wait. Besides, Harry thought they deserved the extra wait for rummaging through his things. He told the small owl he'd reply after dinner, and then turned his attention back to Hedwig.

"Now let's see about changing a few of my things," Harry said.

Harry only had a fifth year understanding of transfiguration, but he already was capable of a lot. He started off by enlarging his bed, turning it from a single into a double mattress, and a soft one at that. Harry also conjured some pillows, like he'd done the night before. Harry wasn't great in his conjuring abilities, and couldn't do anything larger at the moment, but the few small pillows he'd made were simple enough to master.

Harry then opened his old school trunk with a flick of his wand, and dumped all his school supplies onto his bed. He also removed his parent's photo album, his broomstick servicing kit, and all the other things he'd collected over the years that weren't clothes. They all made a huge pile on his bed, but Harry would worry about that later. It was less than an hour before Vernon would be home, probably less for the others, and Harry wanted to be ready.

The only things that remained in Harry's old school trunk now were Dudley's old clothes. Harry wanted to get rid of them as fast as possible, but figured the Dursleys might complain about him wasting ickle Duddy's precious wardrobe. So he'd be returning them to his family, so that he didn't owe them anything anymore.

Harry closed the old school trunk, and dragged it downstairs to wait for his relatives to arrive. He could have levitated it if he wanted to, but Harry enjoyed banging the trunk down the wooden stairs, marking the walls and steps as he went. Once in the family room, Harry sat in the one comfortable seat that wasn't the couch, Vernon's recliner, and waited for his family to return. The trunk was besides him on the floor, and Harry propped his feet up on it while coming up with the things he was going to say to his hated relatives. And he waited.

A little over a half hour later, Dudley and Aunt Petunia returned home, and indeed Dudley did have some kind of sweet smeared all over his fat chins. They didn't notice him at first, and Dudley bounded up the stairs while Petunia checked through the mail at the hall table. However, when she turned to enter the family room, she immediately spotted Harry in his uncle's chair, and became outraged.

"What do you think you're doing, sitting in your uncle's chair? If you know what's good for you, get out now, or else. And how did you even get in anyway? We locked you out this morning! You better have not used any of your abnormality!" Harry's Aunt Petunia spat.

Harry made no move to get up out of the chair. He remained calm and focused on his task, and looked directly in his aunt's eyes.

"Aunt Petunia," Harry addressed her with confidence she had never heard from him before, "I will not be bullied around anymore. I have a few things to say to you and Uncle Vernon when he gets home. Until then, I'll be remaining in this chair. I won't bother you, but would like a few minutes of your time when Uncle Vernon gets home from work."

Harry's aunt couldn't believe what he was saying. They had argued over the years, but Harry had never point blank refused to do something before, and in such a chilling manner as well.

"How dare you talk to me like that? After all we've done for you, you ungrateful little brat! Do you know one of your freaky friends interrupted dinner last night looking for you? She had purple hair! Purple hair! Standing outside in the yard for all the neighbors to see! You just wait till Vernon hears about this." She was shouting at Harry now, and Dudley came down the stairs to see the latest episode of Harry bashing.

"Mum, what's wrong? What's he done now?" Dudley loved to see Harry being punished; it was one of his favorite pastimes.

"Dudley!" Petunia addressed her son now. "Your good for nothing cousin refuses to get out of Daddy's chair, and he's not listening to me. And he broke into the house while we were out!"

Harry didn't pay much attention to their conversation. He just picked up the fact that someone with purple hair had been looking for him. "Must've been Tonks," Harry thought. "At least it was only her looking in my things."

Dudley only smiled as he walked down the remainder of stairs. Any excuse he could find to rough Harry up he enjoyed, and his mother had just given him a good one. He was now besides Petunia, and moved her away so he stood directly in front of Harry. "Is that so Mum? Well then, I'll make him get out. So how about it freak? Move now, and I won't be forced to move you."

"Dudley," Harry was still cool as a cucumber, "I'm not moving. I told your mum that we'd be having a little family meeting about how things are going to be the rest of the summer, and I'm staying in this chair until your dad gets home. I suggest you relax till then. You only just walked down the stairs, and already you've broken into a sweat."

Dudley turned red at being insulted by his skinny cousin, and cracked his knuckles as he crossed the room to manhandle Harry. Harry had no illusions that Dudley would grab him with his ham-like hands and throw him out of the chair. But yet; he remained calm. Until Dudley was only about six feet from Harry; that's when he moved. A flick of

his wrist and his wand was out; this time Harry made sure he'd caught it.

"Stop right there Dudley, or you'll regret it." It was not a request, it was an order.

Dudley had frozen at the sight of the wand. Petunia couldn't see past her beefy son, but wanted to know why Dudley had stopped so suddenly.

"Duddykins, what is it? Go get him!"

It took a moment for Dudley to stutter out a response. "Mummmmmmy! He's got his st-stick thing ppp-pointed at me!" Dudley couldn't move his feet in fright, but his hands worked their way around to his backside. Harry chuckled as he saw Dudley had gotten so heavy he couldn't even reach it anymore.

"WHAT!" Petunia ran over and wrapped her arms around the stuttering boy. "There, there Duddlyums! I won't let him hurt you." She soothed her son while not even looking at Harry. "It'll be OK. Daddy will be home soon, and he'll take care of everything."

Petunia eased her son onto the couch with a groan from the piece of furniture. She sat besides him, rocking him back and forth, while staring daggers at her nephew.

"You just wait," she spat, "till your uncle gets home! We know you're not allowed to use that thing away from your freaky school. It almost got you expelled last year. You wouldn't risk it again!"

Harry only smiled at his aunt. "I'm sorry to disappoint you Aunt Petunia, but I won't be getting expelled this year. Like I said before, let's just wait until Uncle Vernon gets home, and then I'll explain everything."

Petunia look venomously at Harry now. "As if you could explain anything we would want to hear you snotty little...."

But Harry's Aunt Petunia never got to finish her sentence. Harry knew his aunt didn't think much of him, but wasn't going to take one more insult from her ever again. "Silencio!"

It was quite funny to see the look on his aunt's face as she screamed in silent terror. Her faced was all red, and the veins were popping out all over her horse-like neck, but no sound issued from her mouth. Dudley, who had been a little calmer in his mother's arms, now looked terrified.

"What dd-did you dd-do?" A smart man would have left the room, but no one said Dudley was ever smart.

"I silenced your mum. I'll let her speak again when your dad gets home. And if you insult me or start yelling and screaming, I'll silence....never mind. I'll just silence you now anyways." Harry really was enjoying this. Just to make things more interesting he put a full body bind on the two of them also. They both snapped to attention, and fell over each other leaning against the small sofa.

The next ten minutes were some of the most enjoyable of Harry's life. He sat there not saying a word, while watching Dudley and Petunia struggling against the body bind he'd put on them. It only allowed for tiny movements, and neither of them managed to do anything productive. Both of their eyes looked like the cheap bobble-eyes younger kids play with; going crazy in their heads. Petunia was able to move her head a fraction of an inch, and kept looking between her son and nephew. Dudley's slight movement upset the precarious balance he'd found himself in against the back of the sofa. Seven minutes after being cursed, the balance was finally disturbed enough so that he fell over on top of his mother, whose eyes nearly popped out at the extreme weight just placed on top of her.

Harry laughed. "Guess Dudley's diet isn't working too well, huh Aunt Petunia?" He was teasing them, and he loved it. "I wonder if instead of the talk I have planned, I should just keep you like this all summer long. Hmm? What do you two think? No answer? Well, you must like the idea then. I'll have to think about it though. I was planning on building a pig pen in the backyard for Dudley, but this might be more fun."

Dudley was crying now, although the only evidence was the tears streaming down his face. He was still half covering his mother, and Harry couldn't even see Petunia's head anymore. It was this sight that Vernon Dursley came home to just a few minutes later.

"Petunia, I'm home!" He obviously hadn't turned around. "Has the boy come home yet, or...."

He stopped speaking on seeing his family frozen in military attention, one covering the other. Vernon dropped his briefcase and ran over to his wife and son. Vernon Dursley was an extremely normal, ordinary man. And having his family frozen in place, lying together on a sofa certainly wasn't normal.

"Petunia! What's wrong? Dudley? Speak to me!" He shook and questioned them, but they were unable to answer. So Harry answered for them.

"They're frozen in place Uncle Vernon. They got a little rowdy, and I had to immobilize them." Harry's words caused Vernon to leap up off the couch he'd been resting against.

When he found the person behind the voice sitting in his favorite chair, his Uncle Vernon became beet red, and Harry could almost see steam coming out from his ears.

"You! You did this? You can't do this, it's not allowed. Boy, I demand you undo this funny business at once!"

"Uncle Vernon," Harry replied in his cool practiced voice, "I did do it, and I won't be demanded to do anything by you any longer. I planned on having a family meeting to discuss my future in this household, and Aunt Petunia and Dudley didn't think much of the idea. Dudley went to attack me, so I stopped him. If you calm down, I'll release them and we can all sit down and talk about this."

Vernon was outraged. "You can't tell me what to do in my own house! This is preposterous! That's it. I'm kicking you out. Should have done it years ago, but your aunt said...."

"Petrificus Totalus!" With another sweep of his wand, Harry's uncle now joined his aunt and cousin on the very small piece of furniture.

"Like I was saying Uncle," Harry continued, "before I was so rudely interrupted. We're going to be having a family meeting. As you can see, I'm very free to use magic at the moment, and no Ministry owls have come to deliver notes about my being expelled. As I already told Aunt Petunia, that won't be happening again. Now, I'll remove the hexes placed on you if you promise to behave civilly. If you don't, then I'll curse you again, and you won't be able to stop me. I know you can't respond, so blink once if you understand."

Vernon Dursley, as much as he didn't want to, had no choice but to blink.

"Very good then. Finite Incantatum!" Harry ended the body binds placed on all three of his relatives, as well as the silencing spell placed on his aunt. Dudley was still too scared to say anything. Vernon was about to start yelling at Harry again, when he noticed muffled screams coming from his wife who was being smothered to death by their own son. It took almost a full minute for Harry's Uncle Vernon to maneuver the large boy off his wife.

"Now that we're all well and moving again," Harry loved this, "I suggest you all find a comfortable seat. What I have to say won't take too long, but I expect you to make a few interruptions, so I don't know how long this will last."

"Boy, I won't sit here and be lectured like a child! Now you listen here, you will give me that stick right now and maybe I won't punish you for attacking your aunt and me. I'll let you have it back at the end of summer when your return to school, but not before hand." Harry's Uncle Vernon was really getting back his anger now that his wife and son were okay. "You will do the chores your aunt gives you, and spend the rest of the time alone in your room. And that will be the end of this discussion!"

"Sorry Uncle Vernon, that's not the talk I had in mind." Harry smiled as his uncle went to stand up from the couch, and cast a leg locking

curse at the three of them. He replaced the silencing charm on all three as well. Being able to not move his legs, Vernon fell back down onto the sofa, and started to shoot dagger-like looks at Harry.

“Now as I was saying, I want to talk about a few things. You have no say in the matter. I could grossly take advantage of you in this situation, but I’m being fair by giving you a chance.” Harry paused as he let his words sink into the dense heads of his relatives. “Dudley, do you remember the pig’s tail Hagrid gave you for eating my birthday cake?”

Dudley nodded slightly, looking very uncomfortable.

“Well, if I wanted to I could give you a new one, or even turn more of you into a pig. Step out of line this summer, and you’ll find out just how good I am at magic.” Dudley had no idea that human transfiguration was one of the hardest magics to perform, so Harry enjoyed his bluff.

“Aunt Petunia?” Harry asked. “Do you happen to know that I find you have a very long neck? I used to think you looked like a giraffe. How would you like me to add an extra foot or so to your neck, and give you some spots?”

Petunia looks mortified, and placed her hands protectively around her chin.

“And Uncle Vernon. You’re the biggest bastard of the three of you.” Harry wasn’t laughing anymore, he was dead serious. “I can maybe forgive Dudley for treating me like dirt over the years, but that’s only because he’s had you as a role model. You have no excuse. I’ve something special in mind for you.”

Harry reached over to the coffee table and grabbed the day’s newspaper. He set it on top of his trunk, clearly in view to the three Dursleys, and transfigured it into a roll of toilet paper. It was easy enough to do; one paper product for another. But Harry was counting on his family being ignorant on the complexities of transfiguration.

"Uncle Vernon. If you order me around in any way this summer. If you insult me, or my parents, or any of my friends even, I'll take great pleasure in punishing you. I'll transfigure you into a roll of TP just like this one here," Harry pointed to the toilet tissue, "and I'll spend the rest of the summer wiping my arse with you!"

Vernon went deadly pale. In all his years he'd never been so frightened. Not only was the threat vile, but in Vernon's opinion, if he had to wipe an ass, he didn't want it to be a "freaky" one. Harry knew what he was doing when he had picked out each of the scenarios.

Harry continued. "However, if you leave me be the rest of the summer, I promise not to do anything to you at all. I don't like you any more than you three like me, so let's just ignore each other this summer. I'll be spending most of my time in my room, with the exception of going for a jog outside each day. If you have a question to ask me, ask politely, and I'll respond politely as well. In a few weeks I've be moving out, for good this time. I won't return next summer, and you can give Dudley back his second bedroom. This trunk here even has all of Dudley's old clothes in them, I don't need them anymore. And if you behave yourselves, I might even do something nice for you before I leave.

"Dudley, I can brew a potion to help you lose weight if you want. No more diet, just instant weight loss. Or I could fix all your toys you've broke over the years. You decide what you want, and I'll do it if I can." Harry addressed each of his family members separately now.

"Aunt Petunia, I know how much you like to show off your garden. I can make a fertilizer that will guarantee you first prize in the garden club's competition this year." Harry's aunt's eyebrows raised and she actually looked interested in this. "You can choose that, or I'll make a final supper for everyone my last night here. I promise you'll never taste food as good again." Harry didn't mention the fact that he'd be using magic to cook.

"And Uncle Vernon. I highly doubt you're able, but if you can hold back your temper for just a few weeks, I'll give you the thing you want most in life." Harry had his uncle's attention with this statement. "Do

you remember two summers ago when I accidentally blew up your sister Marge?"

Uncle Vernon sneered, but nodded.

"Do you remember the wizards that came after I left, and erased her memory?" Again Vernon nodded.

"They were called Obliviators; it's their job to erase memories of muggles who have accidentally seen magic. There's a spell they use to erase or change a person's memory so that the muggle world won't find out about us. You three have never been obliterated because you're my family, and have always known I'm magical." Harry paused to let this next part sink in.

"I plan on learning that spell this summer. If you manage not to upset me for the few weeks I'm here, if you want, I'll oblivate all three of you. You won't remember me at all, and you'll think I died in a car accident with my parents. Aunt Petunia will be the only one who knows about magic, but I doubt she'd bring it up. You'll have what you always wanted; me gone and a nice normal family."

Harry's uncle was licking his lips with the thought. Harry sincerely doubted that Vernon could hold his temper for so long, but he could see that his uncle was going to try. Either way, Harry wasn't going to be too concerned about mastering obliviation. Harry doubted he would be able to erase fifteen years worth of memories in the few months he'd be at Privet Drive. He doubted he'd be able to learn it in a few years. But if Vernon did somehow miraculously manage to hold in his temper and not curse Harry or his parents, Harry would just erase that part of the deal from his mind. Either way, it worked out.

"I've given you all a lot to think about. I'm going to go have dinner now, and leave you here to think about it. I'll be back afterwards to hear your answer." With that said, Harry picked up the roll of TP and placed it back on the coffee table, right in front of his uncle. He then stood and entered the kitchen to go make his dinner, leaving the three Dursleys on the living room sofa, curses still in place.

Harry purposely had a large dinner. In part because he had only eaten a fast lunch at a fish stand, and in part because he wanted to give his family plenty of time to think over what he had said. Harry knew that Vernon would spend at least the first twenty minutes fuming, and would need the time after that to consider what Harry proposed.

It was mostly a bluff, Harry admitted. Sure, he didn't mind silencing the Dursleys, or putting them in a body bind for that matter, but there was no way he could cause them pain or transfigure them permanently. Harry had just threatened what he thought the Dursleys would respond best to, and he had spent a good deal of time preparing what he would say. The whole conversation was prepared beforehand, and Harry found it ironic that it was easily the longest single conversation Harry had had with all three of the Dursleys.

In fact, the past two days had been virtually non stop prepared speeches, starting with the merchants in Diagon Alley and ending with the Dursleys. The only person Harry had really been himself with was Tom the barkeep, and that was because he knew Tom was trustworthy.

Harry skipped over the large roast in the oven, and settled on a few sandwiches for himself. The roast was tempting, but Harry knew not to push his luck. He'd leave that for the Dursleys. Besides, if the kitchen in his new trunk was really stocked with only the basics, Harry thought that he'd be eating a lot of sandwiches in the upcoming months. He might as well get used to them.

While he ate, Harry spied on the Dursleys through the wall using his new magical lens. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were silently arguing using their hands, and Dudley was attempting to escape by dragging his body along the floor. Attempting, because it seemed that try as he might, Dudley wasn't strong enough to drag his considerable weight.

Thirty minutes passed, and Harry put his plates in the sink finally and went in to have hopefully the last discussion with his relatives, ever. Dudley had given up trying to flee, and was now lying helplessly

about four feet from the sofa. He'd never looked so much like a beached whale as he did right that moment.

Harry retook his position in the recliner, and ended the spells he'd cast earlier. Everyone moved their limbs to stretch them out, and Dudley returned to the sofa, but none of the Dursleys made an attempt to escape. 'That's good then,' Harry assumed, 'that means they'll agree.'

Harry remained silent. In part it was because he wanted the small satisfaction of hearing Vernon admit defeat, but it was also because he was nervous, and didn't want to give that fact away. If the Dursleys refused, or caused trouble drawing the attention of the Order, than Harry's plans were somewhat foiled. His patience paid off however, because Uncle Vernon broke the silence after a few moments.

"Now listen here boy!" Realizing he started to yell at Harry, he calmed down a bit. "It seems you don't give us much choice. We'll leave you alone this summer, but you will leave us alone as well. You won't be allowed to eat with us. In fact, I don't want to even see you unless you're leaving the house. The rest of the time, spend it in your room, and we won't have any trouble. You step out of line once, and there'll be consequences to pay. Understand?"

Harry thought it was funny that Vernon made everything sound like it was his idea, but was smart enough not to laugh. He just nodded, and got out of the chair to head upstairs. Halfway to the second floor Harry turned back to his family, and thanked them.

"Thanks for agreeing to this. I didn't want to have to threaten you, but your history of mistreating me gave me no other choice. In the future, I hope you'll think twice about how you treat other people." And with that last remark, Harry left for his room.

It was now almost eight, and Harry still had a few things he wanted to do before turning in for the night. He planned on opening all his purchases and repacking them into his trunk, and organizing everything too. Harry wanted to get an early start on training

tomorrow, and didn't want to be held up at all. But before Harry could pack his trunk or go through the pile on his bed, he still had to reply to Dumbledore.

Harry sat down at his small desk, and stroked the small owl while he thought about what he would tell the Order. They would no doubt want to know a few things. They'd want to know where he had been, why he had gone, and why he felt he had to sneak away as he did.

Harry had no problems telling the order that he didn't want to have much to do with them this summer. But if they got wind of some of the purchases he had made (mostly the dark art books), or the fact that he could now perform magic unnoticed, the Order would drag him back to Grimmauld Place faster than he could say Quidditch. Harry also wanted to keep some things a secret; at least for now. Like Hedwig, and the guardian tattoos. He didn't know with who or when he'd share those things, but he needed time to think about it. It took Harry awhile to come up a believable answer, but he finally did.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Sorry I gave everyone a fright, but I had some things to take care of, and didn't think you or the Order would let me leave home. When Hedwig returned from King's Cross Station, she was severely injured and could barely fly. I needed to get to Eeylops Emporium, and fast. I know that I could have sent her with one of you, but I also needed to get away for a bit, to think about what the next months are going to be like for me.

As you know, I was miserable last summer. You kept my friends from writing to me, and wouldn't allow me to visit anyone. After the events of last week, I imagine I'll be under even more restrictions now. To say I'm not happy would be an understatement.

So seeing as how I'll be under house arrest for more than two months, I wanted to go to Diagon Alley to get some books to keep me busy. Don't worry, I used a muggle disguise and only Tom at the Leaky Cauldron recognized me. I stayed there overnight. I purchased my textbooks for next year early, so I'll have something to do with my time this summer. If Snape is really all huffy about being out looking for me, tell him I plan on being prepared for his NEWT level prep

class. Of course I don't know if I scored high enough on my OWLs to get in, but I think I did.

Hedwig got bandaged up, but she won't be able to fly for about a month. If you need to get in contact with me, send an owl, and I'll respond. But please don't send too many. Uncle Vernon doesn't like them, and I don't have much to say to you either. If I have any dreams that I think you need to know about, I'll send Hermione a letter by muggle post, and she can forward it to you. I won't be able to send messages every three days like we planned, but I wouldn't worry about that. The Dursleys were quite scared of Moody and the others at the train platform, so I don't think they'll be giving me problems. We just had a little discussion, and we basically agreed to ignore each other this summer.

Don't mistake this letter for an apology of any kind. I'm still upset with the Order, and most of all you. You've kept too much from me over the years, and only tell me when you make a mistake or I find something out on my own. I wonder how much else you know that I should have a right to hear? I'm still not over losing Sirius, and I believe things would have been so much simpler last year if I was informed about Voldemort trying to get into my head. But I've begun to accept that he's gone. I'm only writing to put Mrs. Weasley at ease, and to let you know now that I have the books I wanted, I don't plan on leaving the area again. You can tell Mrs. Figg to expect to see me jogging every day, but that should be the only time I leave the house.

Things are not okay between us, and it will take some time before I trust you like I once did. For your sake, I hope you come clean about anything else you might be keeping from me. I'm old enough to hear it, and I should be able to decide the course of my own life, not you or the Order.

Please forward the three letters I've included to Hermione, Ron, and Ginny, so they know that I'm all right. Don't worry, they don't say anything important, I just wanted to let them know I won't have access to an owl for awhile.

Harry Potter

It was a good thing Harry had been able to write this all in a letter; because there was no way he could lie to the man's face. Harry may not trust Dumbledore much anymore, but the man still exuded confidence and a sense that he already knew what was going on. The letter Harry had written should put everyone at ease, but still not give away any of the secrets that he didn't want them to know. They had no idea he spent most of a day in muggle London. They didn't know about Hedwig becoming a phoenix, or her giving a feather for another wand. And they didn't know about Harry's trip to Knockturn Alley, or the bulk of his purchases. Harry grinned as he thought about how much he had learned about lying and telling half truths the past two days. "They're all going to be in for a big surprise come September," Harry laughed to himself.

Pushing the letter to Dumbledore aside, Harry grabbed three more sheets of parchment to write his friends with. He didn't want to worry them either, but needed to touch base.

Dear Ron,

How's it going? I know we just saw each other a few days ago, but I wanted to let you know Hedwig's been injured, so I won't be writing much this summer. That's why I snuck out of the house; to go get her checked out at Diagon Alley. I'm back now though, so sorry if I worried anyone. Please apologize to your mum for me. If you write, I'll return a letter, but that's the only way I can write you for now.

How are things at the Burrow? I haven't heard about Fred and George since they left school, so what's going on with them? And how's that new shop they opened? And how'd your mum respond to them quitting school? It's a good thing they've been home awhile, otherwise I imagine you'd be hearing a lot of screaming and yelling every day.

That's it for now mate! I hope to hear from you, even if you can't write about anything "informative."

Your friend,

Harry
Dear Hermione,

I don't know if you heard, but I expect you have. Yes I snuck out to go to Diagon Alley, but I had good reason, and I'm back now anyway. Hedwig was injured, and I needed to get her help. I also wanted to buy my textbooks early, seeing as I don't have anything else to do this summer. Better be prepared Hermione, I plan to give you a run for your money this year in classes. Just don't tell Ron!

Because Hedwig is injured, I don't have access to an owl, so I was planning on sending you muggle post if you'll be around this summer. I have your address somewhere in my trunk. Also, I hope you don't mind, but I told Dumbledore if I have any of my strange dreams, I'd send you a letter to forward to him.

That's about it for now. I think I'll be OK this summer. With the work I'll be doing, I don't think I'll be thinking about Snuffles too much. I know you're worried, but don't. I really am getting past it. It's hard, but I've set some goals that I plan on meeting, and it really helps. Let me know what you're up to this summer.

Your friend,

Harry
Dear Ginny,

I know we haven't really written to each other in the past, but with what has happened these past few weeks, I think we've become a bit closer. Hope you don't mind. I was even considering writing Neville and Luna, but don't know where they live or anything. Besides, I know you better.

Anyways, I just wanted to write and say thanks for being with the rest of us at the Ministry. It meant a lot. You held up pretty well too! You're a whole year behind the three of us, and didn't even get as hurt as Hermione or Ron did. How's the ankle by the way?

I'm doing fine, just taking one day at a time. I know you probably heard I ran off the other day, I just needed to think. I'm back now and safe, so please let your mum know I'm sorry to cause a panic. I asked Ron to do the same, but I don't know if he'll remember. Also, I wanted

to ask you something personal. What's happened with Percy? I know it's a touchy subject, and I didn't want to risk asking Ron, but now that Fudge agrees Voldemort is back, has Percy apologized to your parents yet? If not, let me know, and I'll plan on writing him a Howler.

Hedwig's been injured (the reason I ran off to Diagon Alley), so I don't expect to have many chances to write. Just take care of yourself, and I'll see you in September. I expect to be riding in a compartment all by myself, because you'll most likely be joining the other prefects.

Your friend,

Harry

Finishing the last letter, Harry was surprised the longest one was to Ginny. Then again, he thought that he'd had the most to say to her because he'd never written her before. He hoped she didn't think it weird of him. Before Harry could change his mind about sending it though, he addressed all four letters and sent them on their way. The four envelopes were a sizable delivery for the tiny owl, but Harry thought it would be fine.

With the letter writing out of the way, Harry turned back to his trunk. He emptied it out of everything he'd bought earlier, and spent almost an hour alone putting everything in piles and taking all the tags off his muggle clothes. It was getting kind of late, so Harry put the huge stacks of books off to one side to wait until morning. Everything else got repacked in the trunk, this time in a more orderly manner.

The first compartment, even being expanded four times the trunk's volume, was just barely large enough to house all his clothes. With the amount Harry had bought; it was no wonder. The ten robes were on the right side, at the bottom, and all the muggle clothes filled the rest.

The second compartment Harry decided would hold all his other normal possessions. His cauldrons, potion supplies, photo albums, and other junk got piled into the trunk in no specific order. When he got his new broom, and maybe his Firebolt back, Harry would also add those to the space.

The books would go in the third compartment tomorrow. Although he hadn't seen it yet, Harry remembered the three bookcases Leeds had mentioned in that room. With the books he purchased in Diagon and Knockturn Alleys, along with the books he'd emptied from his family vault, Harry estimated that he had over four hundred books stacked on the floor.

The one item Harry hadn't packed yet was the ring he'd bought with his watch. Yesterday, Harry wasn't in the mood to calm down an agitated snake. It was still a little before he normally went to sleep, so Harry thought he'd have the time now.

Dressed in his new silk pajamas, Harry crawled into his newly enlarged bed with the small wrapped parcel. Harry unwrapped it slowly, and made sure not to rattle the package. The ring was placed in a small velvet box, like the kind men proposed with Harry knew. It was dark blue in color, and had no markings. Making sure that his door was locked, and a silencing charm was put on it, Harry opened the tiny box to greet the small snake.

"Hello, are you awake?" Harry addressed the small snake. It wasn't moving like it had been the day before, but Harry thought it might have been because of the dark.

"No, I wasn't, but I am now. Where am I? And who are you?" The small snake began to move slowly, clockwise around the ruby.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I didn't have time to speak before. You're now in my home. I purchased you yesterday at the store where you were being held. My name is Harry." It was remarkable to Harry how he still didn't notice he was speaking another language, but the snake answering him convinced him quickly enough.

"What iss a name? I do not know that word." The snake was slightly puzzled by Harry's response, and he had to explain.

"Um, a name is a word given to people to be able to tell the difference between them. When I am addressed, people use my name. Don't you have a name? Haven't you ever talked to anyone before?"

"If my understanding is correct, I have no name. The only one I have spoken to wasss my master, but that wasss long ago. I have been handled many timesss since then, but never have I heard another of your kind speak my language. How are you able to, and what do you plan to do with me?" The tiny snake seemed to have just as many questions for Harry as Harry had questions for him.

And that's how Harry spent the next hour and a half before he fell asleep. The two exchanged information about their respective lives. Harry told the snake all about his ability to speak Parseltongue, and how he'd gotten the gift from a dark wizard. He went on to tell the snake about all the encounters he'd had with Voldemort, leading right up until last week. In the past, Harry had always felt uncomfortable talking about his feelings with others; even Ron and Hermione. But for some reason, maybe because it was only an object and not a person, Harry had no problems talking with the snake. It even helped him a bit, as he explained what happed to Sirius, and how he initially blamed himself, but was starting to get past that.

"That issst stupid; you were at no fault. You did not mean for it to happen, so it couldn't have been your doing." The snake's answer was one he'd heard before, but it somehow meant more to Harry coming from someone, or something, that didn't know him that well.

For his part, the snake told Harry about his life. And yes, it was a life. The snake wasn't animated as Harry had initially thought; he was ensouled. His master, whose name the snake didn't know, was a lonely wizard whose family had been killed off years before the ring was made. He crafted the ring and ensouled the snake to keep him company, and the two became friends for the rest of the wizard's life. Eventually the old wizard had died, and the ring was passed from one stranger to another, never being worn because he would always hiss at anyone who tried to put him on.

Harry thought it must have been a really long time, perhaps a few hundred years, when hearing that the snake's previous owner had been able to speak Parseltongue. The snake never knew that it was a rare gift until Harry told him, and that it traditionally belonged to evil wizards.

The snake let Harry know that he did know the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, etc. It's just that he held no opinions about the choices one way or the other. His master, Harry learned, had been considered both good and evil in his time, at different parts of his life, so the snake didn't care what someone was labeled. The old wizard who had made him was the only life the snake had known before he'd met Harry, so the snake seemed to lack certain morals and beliefs.

Eventually it got late, and Harry let the snake know he wanted to go to sleep. The snake agreed, and stopped moving on his finger. The last thing the snake said before Harry drifted off to sleep was, "Tomorrow you shall give me a name, so I'll know when othersss addresss me. Sleep well Harry."

AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, this chapter marks the end of the beginning. The stage has been set, and next chapter Harry begins to train. Tune in to see how Harry uses the time tuner. And I promise, more than a few hours will pass per chapter from now on. How did I handle portraying the Dursleys? Was it realistic, or should I improve on their "manners." Glad that everyone likes Hedwig. I think it's an original idea, and we'll be learning more about phoenixes later in the story. To those that think Harry's conversations were a little out of character for him, I agree. But my version of Harry is toughening up some, and is going to stop taking crap from people. Remember, characters evolve as years pass by. Harry won't be staying the same as he was in his earlier Hogwarts years. Besides, the speech he gave to the Dursleys, as well as to most of the shop keepers he met, were all prepared ahead of time by Harry. He knew in advance he would be doing all this, so that's why he was so concise with his speaking abilities. It's not as if he was talking to Cho here! Expect the next chapter in about a week. Now that the holidays are over, I have to get back to normal working hours, and won't be able to turn out a chapter every 2 or 3 days. Thanks again for reading.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you

would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 8 – Dancing with Myself

After another restful night, Harry woke early Wednesday morning to begin his new training regimen. It was hard to believe only a couple of days had passed since Harry had gotten home from Hogwarts; so much had happened already.

Dressed in his new workout clothes, with both his wand and dagger holsters, Harry quietly made his way downstairs to go for a morning jog. Since he'd be outside his house Harry couldn't afford to leave his wand and dagger behind, but the tank top he was wearing wasn't offering any protection at hiding his weapons. So with an easy concealment charm Harry had learned in his fourth year, both holsters were made to camouflage against his skin, and he set out the door.

He'd always been in pretty good shape, but Harry had never run for any lengths of time before, and he soon found out it was harder than it seemed. Not wanting to leave the area, Harry decided to run laps around the block. After only three and a half loops at a mild jog, Harry was more than winded.

“Jeez,” Harry panted to his Seth, “I haven’t even gone two milesss yet, and I’m about to collapssse!”

Seth was the name Harry had given his ring earlier that morning, as it reminded him of a ancient god he'd once seen in a muggle museum on a school trip. Set, sometimes called Seth, was an Egyptian god often portrayed by serpents. There were many descriptions about his loyalties, but one Harry remembered was that he was neither good nor evil, but often switched sides to balance the scales of the fighting between other gods. As the snake had told Harry the night before that he held no opinions about good and evil, Harry thought that Seth was the perfect name for him. Harry also decided to wear Seth on his right middle finger, as it felt most comfortable there. It was the only ring he wore, so Harry figured the middle of his hand was the correct place for it.

Obviously, his old master wasn't one for physical exercise, because Seth said nothing about Harry's running. Not surprising, as most

wizards shunned physical exertion. The standard wizarding view was, “If it could be done with magic, why do it any other way?”

Harry took a short break, and jogged another two laps before he dragged himself back upstairs to his room. It had taken less than a half hour for him to exhaust himself, but Harry comforted himself with the fact that this was only the first day he’d been running, and that he had plenty of time before the summer ended.

Once in his room, Harry continued his exercises with a few push ups and sit ups, but only managed to do about twenty of each. Not having his gym equipment yet, Harry decided to stop there. More exercise would come later. So he went to shower down the hall, not having yet seen the fancy living quarters in his new trunk. He wanted to organize the books he’d purchased first thing that morning, so he could spend the rest of the day exploring his new living space. If he used the new bathroom before organizing his books, he’d kill the day exploring, and not get any work done.

The Dursleys had gotten up while Harry had showered, but smartly said nothing to him in the hallway, and went downstairs to eat. Harry went back to his room, and dressed in a comfortable pair of jeans and a tee shirt. The Birkenstocks he’d worn the day before were still a little stiff, but were becoming much more comfortable the more he wore them, so Harry put those on again as well.

Hedwig greeted Harry a good morning with a few chirps, and hopped over to the piles of books that Harry had made the night before.

“That’s right Hedwig. I’ve got to organize all those now.” He almost thought Hedwig wanted to help with the books. Either that, or she was teasing Harry because he normally wouldn’t be caught dead cataloging a stack of books so big. “So you’d better move out of the way, I’ve got to haul all these into my trunk.

It took almost an hour for Harry to carry the over four hundred books down the ladder of his trunk and into the third compartment. The room, which Harry had only heard described to him before, was perfect for a small library and study. The three bookcases that Leeds had told him about weren’t as small as he thought, and Harry was

able to put all the books in just one bookcase, with only a dozen or so left over for the second case.

The room was paneled in wood like Leeds said, and the study table and four chairs were both comfortable and large enough to provide an ideal studying environment. All the shelves were at arms reach, and there were no wizard portraits, or windows, or other distractions of any kind. Not even Hogwart's library could claim that.

It took Harry almost four hours to properly organize his new books, and look through the ones he'd gotten from his family's vault. Most of those were quite old and rare, and many looked extremely useful. At first he was going to mix all the books together, but then decided to keep the two piles separate. His family books were placed in the third bookcase, organized by subject, just like in Flourish & Blotts. The other books, the one's that Harry had bought, were placed on the first bookcase, also by subject. The middle bookcase Harry decided to keep empty for now, as he'd be placing the books he was currently studying in that one. No doubt his organizational system would one day change, but Harry was happy with the system he'd set up, and he still had plenty of room for expansion.

After his new library was set up, Harry continued with his trunk exploration. He spotted the portal Leeds had talked about in a corner of the room, and found out it worked just like the other security circles. Harry had to place his palm on the portal door, speak his name and the desired compartment number, and then the portal would open. The forth chamber was as empty as the third, and the same size as well, but without the bookcases or furniture. It wasn't as fancy without the polished wood floors, and Harry didn't know what he could do with the space. So he left it quickly to get to the more exciting stuff.

The dueling chamber was in the next room, and held everything Harry could imagine he'd need. It was similar to the way the Room of Requirements was set up during the D.A. meetings, with a few exceptions. There were no books or charts in the chamber, nor was it as big. But since Harry didn't plan on inviting thirty people into the dueling chamber to practice, that wasn't a problem. The empty space off to the side was more than large enough to house the gym

equipment he had purchased the day before, and Harry reminded himself to be out of the trunk by two o'clock for the delivery.

The floor and walls didn't seem to be charmed to cushion a hard fall, but when Harry walked on it or touched them normally, he could feel slight a difference. Taking a leap of faith, Harry discovered the full use of the charms when he jumped up and let himself fall to the ground back first. He would have cracked his head on the floor if the charms weren't in place, but luckily they were. It by no means felt like a soft bed or pillow cushion, but the charms did prevent injury. They felt more like a muggle gym mat, and only slightly bruised Harry's backside.

The dummy rack Harry spotted along the wall opposite where the ladder and empty space were. It housed six figures that looked a bit like mannequins, all hanging off the walls by hooks placed under their arms. There was a large instruction manual on a small shelf, but Harry didn't feel like reading it right now.

Slowly, Harry made his way across the dueling platform to the dummy rack, and took one down. He was going to lean it up against the wall, but the second its feet touched the floor, the practice dummy stood up under its own power.

"Ok then," Harry muttered to himself, "I guess they do work. Let's see how well though."

After backing up a few paces, Harry drew his wand and aimed at the dummy's chest, deciding on what curse to use. He didn't want to damage the dummy, and since he hadn't read the manual yet decided on something that wasn't too destructive. The standard disarming spell; one of Harry's favorites.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry spoke, clearly and loudly.

The flash of light hit the dummy squarely in the chest, and pushed it back a few feet. Harry's couldn't see any damage, and was wondering how he would know how effective he'd been. He didn't wonder too long though, as a second later an illusion appeared above the dummy's head. It looks like a car's speedometer, and a red arrow

rose to a little past the halfway mark before it hovered there for a moment, and then returned to the bottom. The illusion winked out of existence, and the dummy stepped forward to resume its original stance.

'It's like a gauge then,' thought Harry. "It tells you how strong the spell is. Okay, let's try this again. EXPELLIARMUS!"

He repeated the process a few more times, and each time the dummy's illusionary gauge rose a few more degrees. Harry figured by the time he had stopped with the dummy, his disarming spell was rating a seven out of a possible ten. Pleased with the dummy's capabilities and his performance, Harry hung the dummy back up on the wall and took another look around.

The dueling platform was just like the one he'd seen set up in the Great Hall in his second year. It wasn't raised at all, but was clearly marked off on the floor, and the space could be used for a number of things. The whole room itself was longer than the other two he'd seen, and Harry thought that was weird considering the size and dimensions of the trunk's exterior. Oh well.

Another portal door later, and Harry now stood in the sitting room of the trunk's living quarters, and Leeds wasn't joking about it being comfortable. The two matching sofas and three armchairs were all grouped around a low square coffee table in the center of the room, and there were tasteful decorations and knick knacks spread throughout. There was a small cabinet against one wall, and when Harry opened it he found a wizard chess board, decks of tarot and playing cards, and a few other games he wasn't familiar with. A large plush rug covered the entire wooden floor, and wasn't in any pattern that Harry could make out. There were only three tapestries on the walls, but the three were very large. The first was a large landscape that showed rolling hills and a small stream passing by a little cottage or house. The second tapestry was a large family portrait, showing a family of nine, representing at least three generations. Harry wasn't sure who the people were, but every male had unruly dark hair, so he assumed it was of some of his relatives.

The third tapestry was like one Harry had seen before; it was the Potter family tapestry. Just like the one Sirius had at Grimmauld Place, it was a large family tree that dated back generations. Harry spent a few brief moments going over it, and found himself, his parents, and his grandparents. Unlike the Black family tapestry though, the Potter's fortunately hadn't married any Malfoys, Blacks, Snapes, or other traditionally dark families. Harry did recognize a few other surnames, and was surprised to find himself distantly related to some of his classmates, but it seemed that the Potters were always on the side of the light. They also seemed to have no problem intermarrying with muggles. Although Harry's direct male descendants were all fullblooded wizards, he noticed many distant cousins, uncles, and aunts who came from mixed marriages.

The sitting room had three doors attached to it, and Harry entered the single door on the right wall. It opened up into the kitchen, and Harry was pleased to find it was at least as big as the Dursleys'. The enchanted icebox and pantry were quite large and fully stocked, and Harry did notice that there wasn't much variety. After remembering the butterbeer cases he'd bought from Tom, Harry summoned them to him and opened the first case. He placed six bottles in the icebox, and placed the rest in the pantry for future use.

The stovetop had four burners, and the oven underneath was large enough to cook for a family of ten. "Plenty big enough for just me," Harry thought. A look in the other cabinets and drawers, and Harry had found all the plates and flatware that Leeds had mentioned. The cookware was all high quality stuff, as were all the dishes and glassware. The kitchen table itself was pushed up against a corner, and Harry noticed the four place settings were placed along only two sides of the table. If Harry were to pull the table away from the walls, it could easily seat at least six.

Leaving the kitchen, Harry crossed the sitting room to the two remaining doors, and opened the left one. It opened into the bathroom, which Harry found quite large. It wasn't as fancy as the prefect bathroom that he'd been in forth year, but it was close. It was half the size of the library he'd set up earlier that day, and was just as useful. The whole room was decorated in cream colored marble and brown stone, with stainless steel fixtures and accessories. Two sinks

were located side by side in a granite countertop along one wall. A mirror was placed behind the vanity, and again Harry was pleased it wasn't a wizarding one. Two medicine cabinets were placed on each side of the mirror, and seemed to be much deeper than possible.

A large tub, big enough for two, was in the back corner of the room, and Harry noticed water jets surrounding it. Harry recognized the jets as belonging to a muggle hot tub, and was excited about the first bath he'd be taking in it. The tub didn't have as many spigots as the one prefect's bath, but there were at least a dozen others than the standard hot and cold taps, and a quick experiment told Harry they offered a variety of pleasantly scented foams and bath oils.

Next to the tub was a shower stall behind a frosted glass door. There were three adjustable shower heads all attached to the single water control dial, and a small shelf in the marble wall to hold soap, shampoo, and hair potions. A towel rack was placed on the short wall between the tub and the shower, and Harry found the fluffiest towels he'd ever laid his hands on hanging from it.

The wall opposite the vanity held another two doors. One opened up to the loo, which was done simply and tastefully, and the other was a separate entrance to the bedroom.

The bedroom was just as Leeds described it, the most luxurious he'd ever been in. A large king sized sleigh bed was in the middle of the large room, with comfortable satin sheets and pillows done in Gryffindor colors. It wasn't a four poster bed like Harry was used to, but it was just as intimidating. The furniture was made of oak, and was all oversized for comfort. There was a large armoire, a dresser, two night tables, a full sized dressing mirror, and two chaise lounges off in a corner with a small table between them. The walls held no paintings or portraits, but they didn't need them. The walls were painted in soft shades of red and gold, and were designed with intersecting square panels that gave the walls a three dimensional look to them. Adding paintings or other decorations to the slightly dated geometric shapes would be too much.

Next to the dressing mirror was a bi-fold door that Harry assumed was the closet, and he was proved correct. The closet itself was the

size of Harry's room at Privet Drive, and actually had a variety of clothes of different sizes in it already. Female clothes were along the left side, and the right side was all men's. Against the middle wall in the back of the closet were two cots that could be rolled out to have extra sleeping space. Harry remembered that Leeds said the room slept four, so he guessed that this is what he meant. Just out of curiosity, Harry rolled a cot out of the closet and placed it along the wall next to the dresser. It looked like a hospital cot, folded in half at the middle, and Harry wondered why such an uncomfortable piece of bedding would be found in a room like this. His question was answered when Harry unfolded the cot and it magically transformed itself into a standard double bed. It wasn't as nice as the king size sleigh bed, but it was much nicer than the cot it appeared to be.

Harry folded the cot back up and put it back into the closet, and left the bedroom through the last door, which connected back into the sitting room. It seemed the second door in the sitting room was another entrance to the bedroom. 'It makes sense,' Harry thought to himself, 'that I can enter the bathroom from the bedroom or sitting room. And if I ever have company, they can use the loo without going through my things.'

Once in the sitting room again, Harry's watch told him it was just past one o'clock, and he wanted to have a quick lunch before he had to be downstairs for the delivery. He entered the kitchen again, and fixed himself a large turkey sandwich. That, with a few crisps and a cold butterbeer made an excellent lunch, and Harry still had fifteen minutes to kill before the deliverymen arrived. Deciding to play it safe, Harry left his trunk grudgingly and went downstairs to wait for them. None of the Dursleys were home, and that was just fine with Harry.

Harry ended up waiting forty minutes before the men finally came, but he wasn't surprised. When do delivery men ever turn up on time? When they finally did arrive, Harry instructed them to just leave the equipment in the front hall. Harry signed for his things, tipped the two delivery guys ten pounds each, and after they left shrunk the two machines and free weights, and levitated them upstairs.

Harry didn't waste any time placing his new equipment in the empty space in the dueling chamber. The two machines fit just fine, and

Harry placed the free weights on the floor for now. Once he learned how, he'd conjure up a rack for them later.

The last remaining trunk compartment Harry hadn't seen was the seventh, and according to Leeds it was just a big empty room. Boy was it ever. Harry thought the ceiling must have been thirty feet high, and the room was a perfect square. Harry might have not even had to buy a treadmill, as he could have just run laps around the room it was so big. So big in fact, that Harry didn't feel he needed to explore it further. There wasn't anything special about the room; it was just big.

With most of the afternoon left in the day, Harry returned to his library to do some actual work. He wouldn't be starting today, but wanted to organize the rest of the summer so it would be most productive for him. There was just over a month left until his birthday, and about a month after that till the start of term. So Harry decided to split his summer into two sessions, and set about planning each one out. He had five years of abiding by Hermione's revision schedules to thank for that.

Taking a seat at the study table, and pulling a quill, ink bottle, and parchment from an inside drawer, Harry set down to make a list of things he wanted or needed to learn. The first half of the summer would be dedicated to magical theory and advanced spells that would help him once he moved to his new home. Harry threw in a few defensive techniques as well, but mostly concentrated on theory. The second half of the summer would be more geared to offensive spells; learning to attack and restrain. He'd continue with the theory, but by then Harry hoped he would have a pretty good understanding of the subject.

Even though he had bought his next two years worth of textbooks for school, Harry decided not to concentrate on schoolwork. If he did that now, he'd be wasting his time in class later that year. Besides, if he worked on advanced spells and theory, the schoolwork should come easier to him than to the other students. The only exception Harry made to this was potions. He really wanted to show Snape up this year, and knew he had some catching up to do. So Harry decided to work on the basic potion principles, and become more comfortable around burning cauldrons and bubbling ingredients.

The first and most important thing Harry needed to learn was the Fidelius Charm. It was how he planned to hide the thirteenth floor of the apartment building he saw. Harry knew it could work because that's how Dumbledore hid number twelve Grimmauld Place; but it would take a lot of practice. He had bought an entire book on the subject, and some of the ancient texts he found in his family's library had information as well.

Advanced transfiguration and conjuring was another subject Harry wanted to learn fast. It would come in useful once he moved to his new home, and Harry at least had a basic grounding in the field to start with. He needed to learn how to transfigure larger objects into more complex items, as well as conjure something larger than a pillow. Conjuring was especially difficult for Harry. Anything larger than a quaffle he attempted would lose its form and eventually disappear. To conjure an item and have it remain took great concentration, and Harry planned on learning it this summer.

Occlumency was a definite must this summer. After the events of last year, Harry had no wish to be exposed to Voldemort's evil mind again without him knowing about it. The standard visions he'd always had, although painful, were at least helpful in that they showed Harry what Voldemort was up to. It was the violation of his mind he wanted to stop. Harry thought about learning Legilimency as well, but wisely put it off until later. He figured it would be smarter to learn the basics of defense first, and then learn how to attack afterwards.

General magical theory was another subject Harry decided to study the first part of the summer, although not one he was excited about. Practical lessons were always more fun, but learning theory would help him out a lot. In the introduction to the text he purchased on the subject, the author compared magic to a muscle. Knowing and understanding how the muscle worked would make it easier to flex. And practicing advanced spells beyond one's reach would be like maxing out in lifting weights. The more one practiced advanced spells, the stronger the "magic muscle" would become. It only made a little sense to Harry at the moment, but enough for him to see the potential benefits of learning more.

Apparition was the last major ability Harry needed to learn before his birthday. He couldn't count on taking the Knight Bus everywhere he went, as the Order and Death Eaters would eventually catch on to his movements. Harry knew that learning apparition wasn't especially difficult, it was just dangerous. The twins had learned in only a few weeks, and Harry thought if they could do it, he certainly could. He would just take it slowly, and be careful so as not to splinch himself. Once Harry was able to apparate, he could move about in the world more freely, and be able to escape any dangerous situations that might arise.

By the time Harry had finished his list of learning tasks for both halves of the summer, it was only a few minutes till eight o'clock. Harry was getting hungry once again, and made his way to the kitchen for some food. He made an easy pasta dish with chicken and mushrooms, and had another butterbeer to wash it all down with. Harry noticed the dirty plates from lunch he'd put in the sink were now clean, and thought that he could get to like eating in this kitchen. Fifteen minutes later, Harry made his way back to the library to put his things up for the night, when he was met with a surprise.

Sitting at his study table, with his back towards Harry and his nose in a book, was a strange person with a hood covering their head. The person, Harry didn't know if it was male or female, made no notice of Harry entering the room, and continued reading the book as he flipped through the pages. Harry didn't know who the person was or how he'd gotten into the trunk, so he silently drew his wand out of its holster and crouched down low, ready for an attack.

"Who are you?" Harry demanded. "And how did you get in here?"

The stranger just chuckled to himself, and Harry didn't recognize the voice. He or she made no move to turn around, and kept on reading.

"Answer me!" Yelled Harry. "Turn around now and slowly, and I won't be forced to curse you."

The stranger laughed out loud now, and something was vaguely familiar. He put the book down, his laugh had given away the fact he

was a man, and made to turn around. He did slowly, and as he did he spoke in a smooth and jovial voice.

“Curse me? Come now Harry, you were only going to use a disarming spell. That’s what you always do. First tip of your new training, never begin a duel with a disarming spell; it’s bad form.” By the time the man had finished speaking, he was now turned to face Harry, and had lowered his hood.

To say Harry was surprised to the man’s identity would be a gross understatement. If he had thought about the situation some more, Harry wouldn’t have been surprised at all, but he was too shocked to think rationally. Now Harry knew why the voice was familiar. Although it had sounded different because he had never heard it before with his own ears, it was a voice he knew well. As well as the face, the hair, and the scar. Harry was looking into the emerald green eyes of himself.

“Surprise!” The second Harry smiled. “Before you say or ask anything, let’s wait a few moments. We’re expecting another guest.” The second Harry continued to laugh at the original Harry’s expression, and motioned for him to take a seat at the study table.

Harry did, getting over his surprise quickly, for he started to understand what was going on. It was about two minutes that they waited for the third person, and neither was much surprised this time when a third Harry popped into existence in a corner of the room. He was dressed in different clothes than either of the other two, but had a recognizable time tuner in his hand. The third Harry wasted no time and immediately took another seat at the study table, and all three Harrys faced each other.

“Now before we begin to start asking ourselves questions,” the third Harry spoke to the others, “both of you be quiet and let me explain. Things will be much easier this way, and as I’m really you, I’ll be explaining in a way that I know you can understand.”

All Harrys nodded an agreement, and the third Harry began a very long winded monologue. Before he spoke though, he placed the time

tuner in the middle of the table for all three to see. He gestured to it and began.

“As we know, when we were in the Department of Mysteries, this time tuner fell into our robes and we didn’t discover it till a few days later. Having a closer look, we noticed that it was different than the model Hermione had used third year. She had used a time turner, and this is a time tuner, as the label clearly states. It’s an advanced model, which allows more than a few hours time travel. As the dial clearly shows, the tuner allows for travel back a number of days, with the maximum number being seven. So, we can go back up to one week in time, but not more than that. We wondered how we could use it, and immediately thought of going back to save Sirius. But from prior experience with time travel, we know that it could be dangerous. And as we didn’t see a future version of ourself in the veil room, we knew that we hadn’t gone back to save him.”

Harry paused here to let this sink in. All Harrys knew it of course, but the time let them bring their minds to the conclusions they had already made. After another moment, the third Harry continued.

“So the week before school ended, and during the train ride home, we came to a conclusion. We were tired of being treated like a kid, and we wanted to take some control of our own life. This means rebelling against the Order of the Phoenix, and taking a more proactive stance in the fight against Voldemort. So we decided to use the time tuner to provide extra time this summer to help us be better prepared. We thought about how best to use the time travel, and we decided. Now pay attention, this is where it gets tricky.

“Every Sunday night at eight o’clock, we will use the time tuner to go back exactly six days, to the previous Monday night. We could go back the full seven days, but it would get complicated and a chance of overlapping time travels could occur. So we go back six days instead, and at that point on Monday night there will be two of us. When Sunday night comes around again, the younger Harry will go back as the older one already did, and the older one will wait an extra half hour. At half past eight o’clock, we’ll go back again, and will arrive exactly a half hour after the other did in the past, just as I arrived a half hour after you did. At that point there’ll be three of us.”

The third Harry illustrated each time jump by pointing to the others, and made sure both were up to speed.

"If we keep on this schedule for the rest of the summer, there will always be three of us, except for the time between Sunday night at eight thirty, and Monday night at eight o'clock. By traveling back only six days instead of seven, it will allow the one day of normalcy, and wipe the slate clean of the two of us who are from the future. Because two Harrys will always travel back six days on Sunday night, leaving the Harry who's in his real time. I know it sounds confusing, but it will make sense in a few days. I know that for certain because I've already been doing this for three weeks. I'm your future self.

"By the time September first comes around, about nine weeks will have passed in real time, but to us it will seem like seven months. That's almost an entire school year. And that's the extra time we'll be taking advantage of. If we're careful, as I've been so far, no one will catch us and no one will know. That's why this trunk is so important. Our future selves can never leave this trunk. To do so would risk our getting caught and disturbing the timeline. It's OK for us to interact with each other, because we know about it already. And since the time tuner is a Department of Mysteries object, which no one knows we have, the Ministry can't detect its use. The Harry who's in the current timeline will spend time outside of the trunk so as not to tip off the Order that something's going on, while the other two of us sleep down here. Once again, I already know that it works, because I've already done it." The third Harry said this with a smile.

"When school starts, only one of us will be riding the train, and we can decide later if we should continue the traveling, or stop it during term. It all depends on how far we come this summer. And the best thing about all this, is that I already know it's going to work. It's all a giant loophole. I already have lived through your part, so I know exactly what to say and do. And if a future self of ours doesn't show up on time, then the present one of us knows not to travel back to that time. Because we're all one person, it's impossible to lie or deceive ourselves, so we have nothing to fear. I already know the exact questions you're thinking of, and know that you've already agreed to this. Because that's what I did two weeks ago. And that's about it I guess."

The second Harry had already heard this speech once before. The original Harry however, the one in the real timeline who was new to all this, asked the others for a few minutes to turn all this over in his head. It was true that most of what was said to him made sense, as he was explaining it to himself. He just needed the time to go over everything and see if he was unsure about any of the possibilities. Harry did come up with one thing to question, and was about to voice it to the others, when he was interrupted by the third Harry, the one who had already traveled twice before.

"I know you have a question, because I had a question too. The answer is simple. Although there will be three of us, and we'll have to eat, sleep, train, and study together, you want to know if we can influence our future or past selves to create a paradox. To change something that's already happened. And the answer is no. No matter what I do or say, it's the exact thing you'll do and say in two weeks time, even if you try to say something different. Because we'll be spending so much time together, we won't be remembering perfectly every word or action our past selves take. Often times, you won't remember that you did or said something till your past self does it. You could worry about it endlessly if you wanted, but the fact is simple.

"Take this for example. Tomorrow you'll have a three egg omelet for breakfast with two pieces of bacon, and a glass of juice. And as hard as you try, for whatever reason, you won't be able to have anything else for breakfast. Now is that because I told you about it already, or is it because that's what you would have had anyways. It doesn't matter, and I don't think we could figure out an answer to that question anyways. It's like asking 'What came first, the chicken or the egg?' So you'll just have to accept it, as I've already done."

All three Harrys at this time were getting tired, as it had been a long day. Since the two future ones weren't going anywhere, Harry decided to call it a night so he could think on the problem. He left the other two to fend for themselves, and left the trunk for his old bed in the Dursleys' smallest bedroom. It was pretty early still, not even ten yet, and Harry spent hours tossing and turning in bed before he fell asleep. The next few weeks would prove interesting.

At the same time Harry was falling asleep in Privet Drive, a doorbell rang inside an invisible building, waking a screaming portrait that no one liked.

"TRAITORS! HALFBLOOD FILTHY BLOOD-TRAITORS! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! YOU DARE BRING YOUR KIND IN HERE? KREACHER, WHERE ARE YOU? GET THE MUDBLOODS AND WEREWOLF OUT OF HERE NOW!" The portrait of Mrs. Black continued in her rants as Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt entered number twelve Grimmauld Place, headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Be quiet you old witch!" As Severus Snape was the only Order member present whose family traditionally had studied the dark arts, it was his assignment tonight to shut up the vile portrait when other Order members arrived. It was known to her that he had been a spy, but he was still treated far better than anyone else in the house. Luckily for him, Moody and Shacklebolt were the last two members expected for the night's meeting. As Snape pulled the curtains in front of the front hall's portrait, the two aurors closed the door and went to greet him.

"Evenin' Severus," Moody was gruff and to the point as always. "Any idea what the meetin's about?"

Snape had finished with the portrait of Mrs. Black, and motioned for the two men to follow him so she wouldn't be upset again. "Not really. Albus called the meeting, and almost the entire Order's inside. If I had to make a guess though, I'd say it had something to do with our resident boy-wonder." Snape's voice was dripping with sarcasm, and both aurors let his remarks slide. Neither of the two men knew Harry that well, but both knew that Snape wasn't a fan.

The three entered the drawing room and were greeted by the other members of the Order. Almost everyone was in attendance tonight. From Hogwarts there was Snape, McGonagall, Dumbledore and Hagrid. The elder Weasley's were in attendance; Arthur, Molly, Bill, and Charlie. Moody, Shacklebolt, Tonks, Amelia Bones, and Amos Diggory were there from the Ministry. The other random members;

Mungdungus Fletcher, Sturgis Podmore, Dedalus Diggle, Emmiline Vance, Hestia Jones, and Elpias Doge; were scattered throughout the room. And Remus Lupin sat alone in a corner, quiet and not conversing with anyone. There were other members not present, but the core, or rather inner-circle of the Order was all accounted for.

“Ahh, good evening everyone!” Dumbledore’s quiet but demanding voice spoke out across the room. His eyes twinkled as always, and most people wouldn’t know that he was greatly troubled. “I thank you all for coming tonight on such short notice. We have a few things to discuss pertaining to the upcoming Death Eater trials, and a subject which I’d like to breach on the matter of young Harry.”

Snape sneered at the mention of Harry’s name, and Lupin looked up from his lap, but the rest of the Order remained with a neutral look on their face. Most knew that Harry had disappeared two days before, but the notice Dumbledore had sent out about the night’s meeting also included the news that he was safe and accounted for, so no one was worried. Well, except perhaps for Molly Weasley.

The Ministry employees, mainly Amelia Bones, briefed the group on the Death Eater trials that would be happening in three weeks time. It seemed Minister Fudge, in another act of grand stupidity, hadn’t believed all ten captured Death Eaters from the DoM were guilty of their crimes. His “good friend” Lucius Malfoy had convinced Fudge that he, along with Avery, Nott, and McNair had all been under the Imperius Curse, like they had been fifteen years ago. Only the Death Eaters who had recently escaped from Azkaban were going back on trial, and as they’d already been convicted of life sentences, the trial really was only a political opportunity for Fudge. He got to show the public that he was putting away criminals, and the real danger gets to walk away scott-free.

“That’s insane!” Yelled Bill Weasley. “How can Fudge just let that trash walk? We can prove that they were attacking Harry and the others. Hell, half the Order was there fighting them!”

Dumbledore only gave a grim smile as he calmed the oldest Weasley son. “I know Bill, but that’s what Cornelius has decided. And although we could provide testimony of the truth, he has already ruled that

we're biased witnesses because we were on Ministry grounds that night unlawfully. Add that to the fact we've uncovered Lucius Malfoy has donated 50,000 galleons to Fudge's reelection campaign, and it's clear to see where our Minister stands in this decision."

"Madam Bones, can't you do anything? You didn't have anything to do with the Order when all this happened." Bill wouldn't give up, and looked to the newest member for hope.

"I'm afraid not Bill. Fudge has forbidden the use of Veritaserum, and that was the only way to prove that Malfoy and the others weren't under the Imperius. To question a decision of the Minister would bring unwanted attention. Besides, we already know that Fudge has support from most of the Wizengamont. Last summer, if you hadn't provided an eye witness in his trial, Potter would have been wrongfully expelled. They won't go against Fudge as long as he keeps their pockets lined with gold. I'm afraid without further proof, there's nothing more to do."

The talk about the trials lasted a few minutes longer, but nothing new was mentioned. With no further business Dumbledore calmly addressed the group again. This time he looked far older.

"The other matter I wish to discuss is Harry Potter. As you all know, he left his home two days ago and went missing. Upon further investigation we found he had snuck out on Mundungus's watch using an invisibility cloak, and summoned the Knight Bus a few blocks away from Privet Drive. In reaction, I sent an owl to Harry to await his return, and asked many of you to go out and search for him. Luckily early this morning I received a return owl, and he is fine. Harry's back home, and has said he doesn't plan on leaving the area again."

Snape snorted out loud in disgust. He had spent a full day searching the muggle neighborhood for Harry, and wasn't pleased by playing babysitter. "What was his excuse, and how do we punish him?"

Dumbledore pretended to not notice Snape's attitude, and answered the questions. "It seems young Harry's owl was injured in her flight back to Privet Drive, and she needed medical attention. Harry also

mentioned that he knew he wouldn't be allowed much freedom this summer, so went to Diagon Alley himself to purchase his school books ahead of time. It's only been a few short hours, but I asked Remus to travel to Diagon Alley this afternoon to check Harry's story. He wasn't recognized anywhere other than the Leaky Cauldron where Tom verified he spent the night, but there was a set of sixth year text books bought that day from Flourish & Blotts. It seems that Harry was telling the truth, and that's what worries me."

Molly Weasley, who had been uncharacteristically quite so far, now spoke up as the wizened headmaster mentioned his worries. "Albus, is he okay? What do you mean worry? It's those muggles, isn't it?"

Dumbledore was amused at Molly's over protectiveness, but gave a sad smile as he removed the letter Harry had written him from his robe pockets.

"Not to worry Molly, Harry is perfectly safe," Dumbledore assured her until she sat back down. "What concerns me isn't his safety at the moment, but his opinion of us. This is the letter he wrote me this morning, and I think his attitude explains why he ran off without telling us."

With the twinkle gone from his eyes, Dumbledore read Harry's letter aloud to the group, much to their dismay. Snape couldn't care less, but scoffed at the line about Harry being prepared for his Potions class. Minerva, Hagrid, Molly, and the others who knew Harry best showed surprise in the words he used to answer the headmaster's letter. Remus, who was showing signs of life for the first time that night, nodded an understanding as Dumbledore concluded the letter.

"Albus! That doesn't sound like Harry at all. He's never been that curt with you, or anyone for that matter." Minerva McGonagall paused hesitantly as she looked at her colleague, and added under her breath, "Except for Severus perhaps."

The other Order members all whispered similar comments; none of them could understand how a student could talk with such disrespect to the esteemed professor. Dumbledore quieted them all with a wave of his hand, and sat down showing his true age.

"Alas, I'm afraid there is a very good reason for Harry's attitude, but I had hoped he would have gotten past it by now. And I never expected his feelings to pour over to the other Order members."

Charlie Weasley spoke for the first time. He didn't know Harry that well; had only met him a few times; but couldn't imagine him speaking that way. "Professor Dumbledore, what possible reason could there be for Harry to speak like that? It seems as if he almost hates you."

The old man sighed. "It's a long story really. The night of the Ministry attack, I sent Harry to my office by portkey while I straightened things out with Cornelius. When I returned, we had a conversation we should have had years ago, but one which I've been dreading for quite some time. Harry has long wondered why he was targeted by Voldemort all those years ago, and why he was placed with his muggle relatives who seem to not like him. Even as early as his first year at school he asked these questions, and I avoided them until I thought he would be able to handle the answers. You all know that the prophecy was destroyed the night of the attack, and that Voldemort never got to hear it. I suppose that's the one bit of good news that came from all of this. But the prophecy was originally made in my presence, and that night I finally told Harry what it was about, and answered the questions he'd been asking for the past many years. Needless to say, he wasn't happy with the answers he received. He also blames me and the rest of us for ignoring him this past year, and partially for the death of Sirius. Initially he blamed himself I think, but I believe he's gotten past that, just as he moved past the false blame of Cedric Diggory's death."

Amos Diggory looked shameful then, as he too had initially blamed Harry, at least in part, for the death of his son. Remus continued to nod, as he too felt some blame for the death of his best friend. Snape, who didn't know what compassion was, didn't care about Harry's attitude. He was more interested in the prophecy, and demanded to be told what it said.

"I'm sorry Severus, but that information is for Harry to know, and him only. If he wishes to tell anyone else, he may, but even that I suspect he won't. If I told anyone else, especially someone whom he doesn't

want to know, I'm afraid Harry might further separate himself from us. Judging by what he did to my office after our initial conversation, I'd hate to think of him becoming even angrier."

Snape wasn't satisfied with the answer, but said nothing as he sank back into his chair. Come fall he'd be forced to continue Occlumency training with the boy, and he figured he could find out the prophecy then. Molly on the other hand, spoke up loudly, wanting to know what Harry had done to Dumbledore's office.

Dumbledore actually perked up with a cheery smile as he told the tale of Harry thrashing his office. "I dare say he let off a fair bit of steam. Everything has been repaired since, but the damage was quite extensive."

"So what do we do now?" Moody spoke up, as it was him who was in charge of organizing shifts for watching over the boy.

Dumbledore thought for a few moments, and then answered. "I think it's best to do what Harry asks, at least for the moment. We'll still keep a watch on him, but from a distance. I don't think he was deceitful in saying he won't be leaving the area again, and we'll trust him for now. Alastor, Nymphadora, Kingsley, Remus, you four are to continue your watch over the general area. I think it's best to shorten each shift, and you may use Arabella's house as a base of operations. Mundungus, I'm afraid I'll have to remove you from watch duty. It doesn't seem to suit you, and I think we can use your services elsewhere. With Voldemort publicly back now, there's bound to be much talk. Please investigate any rumors heard in Knockturn Alley and the other less reputable places. Voldemort might be organizing his men, or trying to recruit more. Find out all you can. Severus, please join him, but be safe. It's known that you turned spy, so don't take any chances. I know that you still maintain relationships with some high ranking Death Eaters, but if one of them were to catch you alone and bring you before Voldemort, I'm afraid of what would happen. The rest of you, business as usual. Let's see how the Ministry handles the next few weeks, and we'll meet back then. I'll give Harry some time to settle down, and then write him another owl. Hopefully by then he'll have calmed down some."

"Albus," Remus Lupin spoke up quietly. "When the time comes, I'd like to be the one to contact Harry. I think I know what he's going through, and I believe anymore contact from you would only anger him further, no matter how much time has passed."

McGonagall didn't think it possible for Dumbledore to make a mistake, and voiced her opinion. "Nonsense Remus. Albus is perfectly capable of corresponding with Harry."

Remus turned his head sharply at the transfiguration teacher. Those who knew him best would have noticed the glint of anger in his eyes. But unfortunately, those who knew him best were now all dead.

"Really?" He snarled. "It seems so far the only thing he's capable of doing is upsetting Harry! And I don't think it nonsense to want to look after him. He is my friend's son after all! I think I have the right to want to look after him!"

Remus noticed he was yelling now, and took a few deep breaths. Once he relaxed some, he continued in his normal calm manner. "I'm sorry Minerva, I didn't mean to snap. I simply meant that Harry seems to blame Dumbledore and the Order for many things, including largely ignoring him last year, which led to this whole troubled mess in the first place. I think it'd be best if I approach him not as an Order member, but separately. I've kind of been a distant uncle of sorts to Harry, and now more than ever, I'd like to fill those shoes. Harry needs someone who he's able to talk to and trust, aside from his friends. In the past that person was Sirius and Albus, but they're not an option anymore. If I can't be there for Harry, I don't know who can be. Even if that means I have to separate myself from the Order a bit to do so, I think it's best."

Molly Weasley shot up at this. "What about us? We've always been there for Harry if he needs us; he's like a son already!"

Remus smiled "I have no doubt that you care for Harry Molly, and no doubt that he cares for you. But the simple fact is that you mother him too much. You'll want to protect him at all costs, and that's exactly what Harry doesn't want right now. He wants an equal to tell him the truth, not a parental figure to shelter him from it." Remus paused as

his breath hitched. “And I need this too. With him gone, just like Harry, I’m all alone now.” Remus didn’t need to mention Sirius by name, everyone understood. Snape rolled his eyes, but the others remained quite. Molly shuddered at the realization that Remus was indeed alone. Being in such a large family, she couldn’t imagine how hard it was to have no one else in the world.

Dumbledore spoke up again, ending the discussion. “I think that’s a fine idea Remus. You’ve always gotten along well with Harry, and we’ll leave him to you. Please make sure to keep me updated though, and make sure he realizes the need to remain at his relative’s house. You may send him letters or visit in person, but please do not share with him any Order business. He’s not a member yet, and until he’s mastered Occlumency so Voldemort can’t access his thoughts, sadly he remains a liability.”

Remus and the others agreed, and the meeting quickly came to a close.

The five weeks before his birthday passed relatively quickly for Harry, considering it felt more like four months to him. The plan he had laid out so far was working, and even he didn’t expect to accomplish so much in just a short amount of time.

Remus kept to his promise, and it was him who contacted Harry by owl a week after the Order of the Phoenix meeting. After the initial scolding and worry, Remus explained to Harry how he was feeling after Sirius’s death, and Harry was surprised to find his once stoic teacher had just as many angry feelings as he. Through exchanged letters the two got to know each other better than they had before. They even met in person once. Harry didn’t want to have Remus over at Privet Drive (to protect his secret and to avoid the Dursleys), so they decided to meet in a park.

The park was the same one from the previous summer when Harry was attacked by Dementors, but being able to use magic comforted Harry against a repeat occurrence. The two spent the afternoon together; about a week before Harry’s birthday. They talked about school, girls, Harry’s parents, both their childhoods, and just about anything else that suited them. Harry felt guilty for having to lie to

Remus about what he was doing with his time, but it was a necessary evil.

Remus wasn't Harry's only contact the first part of the summer. His friends wrote letters too, all delivered by owl from Ron. Because Hedwig was out of commission, or so everyone thought, Ron sent Pig or Errol by each week, delivering letters from himself, Ginny, Hermione, and even Luna and Neville.

In true Ron fashion, he had nothing of notable interest to write in his letters. As interesting as the chances were of the Chudley Cannons making the play-offs that year, Harry found he didn't much care after the first three letters. He knew Ron couldn't write anything too personal because owls weren't a safe method of transportation, but with the exception of Quidditch talk and saying "Don't let the muggles get you down," Ron had nothing much to write.

Ginny on the other hand was surprisingly refreshing in her letters. She had much to say, and addressed the questions Harry had about Percy and the rest of the family. It turned out that Harry was smart to not mention Percy to Ron, because the two weren't on good terms. After Fudge admitted that Voldemort had indeed been resurrected, Percy did make a trip to the Burrow, but not to apologize. He "forgave" his family for going against the Ministry, and welcomed their support of Fudge in his time of need. He was kicked out by five outraged brothers shortly afterwards. By the way Ginny had made it sound; Harry figured Percy was in even worse shape than he had been in before. Only Mrs. Weasley wanted to talk with Percy after his visit, and none of the brothers would even mention his name. In fact, the morning after Percy had visited, Bill went to the Ministry building to return the visit, and reamed out Percy in front of his co-workers. Bill had told his siblings later that night exactly what he had said.

"Don't you even think about showing your prat face until you apologize to Mum and Dad! And if I hear you criticize our family again in public, I'll show you first hand some of the nastier curses I've had to break over the years! This job is the worst thing that's ever happened to you Perce, and if you decide to side with a corrupt Ministry over your family, you're going to become a very lonely person!"

Aside from Percy, Ginny also wrote about how the twins were doing in their business. Since they left school, they had been inventing and producing like crazy. The shop they had opened shortly after leaving school in Diagon Alley was an initial success, but the twins soon ran out of products and ideas, and therefore ran out of money. After a lot of talks, it was decided that they'd close the shop while concentrating on product research and development, to once again save more money. They'd still fill orders by owl post through their catalogue though, and that way the wouldn't have to worry about attending a counter, or all the other bothers that come with running a store. Harry was glad to hear about the twins, and was curious as to how Ginny's relationship with Dean Thomas was going, but she never wrote about him.

Hermione's letters were practical and motherly like always. When she heard that Harry had escaped to Diagon Alley to buy advance copies of his school books, she praised him for his initiative and work ethic. That is, right after she scolded him for worrying everyone. Hermione also mentioned that she would be traveling through Europe the last month of vacation with her parents, so she wouldn't be able to visit him or Ron before school started. Harry was actually happy for Hermione; that she was going to enjoy a trip with her family. In the dangerous times of the wizarding world, it was nice that she could escape into muggle society to have some fun and forget her problems for awhile. Harry was glad at least someone could have a trouble free summer.

Luna had only written one short note, most of which didn't make any sense. She seemed to jump to different topics randomly, with no train of thought whatsoever. Harry replied as best he could, and thanked her again for her help during the Ministry fiasco. He also wanted to thank her father again, for publishing his interview in the Quibbler. Harry mentioned that in the future he might want to do that again, seeing as how he couldn't trust the Daily Prophet.

Neville's letters seemed to avoid the topic of current events, but did stress his thanks to Harry for helping him with his defense work. He told his Gran all about how he was taking secret lessons, and she seemed to think Neville was a hero of sorts. Neville also talked about

his new wand endlessly. He and his Gran were surprised when Ollivander knew that Neville would be coming, and then even went as far as giving him a new wand for free. Of course Neville hadn't used the new wand yet, but he wrote that it felt much more comfortable than his dad's old one.

Speaking of wands, Harry's new one was owled to him from Ollivander's eight days after his Diagon Alley trip. The short note that the wand maker included stated that it was among his best made ever, and that he looked forward to hearing how it handled.

Just like Hedwig, the wand made from her tail feather turned out to be very strong and powerful, if a bit temperamental. Harry found that if he used it to cast spells that he had great proficiency in, the results were staggering. However, if Harry used the wand to try new spells, or to use it in situations where Harry wasn't as confident as he'd normally be, the wand would give varied results. So Harry made it a point to learn and practice with his old wand almost all of the time, and only switch to his new one once he had mastered a spell.

The new broom arrived the day after his wand, and it was just as remarkable. At first Harry didn't know what the strange owl was carrying, as he had never seen a trombone case before. That's what the broom was cased in, along with a new broom servicing kit, handle polish, and a small manual highlighting some of the broom's features. Harry didn't have much chance to fly the broom at Privet Drive, but he did take it for a short spin in the seventh compartment of his trunk. The room was barely tall enough to allow safe flight, and the length didn't allow for Harry to reach maximum speeds, but Harry was encouraged at how the broom handled and responded to his direction. True, it almost looked beat up compared to his old Firebolt, but as Harry had proved himself, looks can be deceiving.

Aside from letters from his friends and the new toys, Harry's training was making outstanding progress. By the day before his birthday, Harry had already completed the tasks he had set down for the first half of the summer, and was well into his plans for the second half.

The Fidelius Charm wasn't as hard to learn as Harry thought it would be. As it turned out, the charm wasn't difficult at all; it was just not

well known. The book that Harry had purchased proved it. It gave a very thorough description of the charm, as well as all the benefits and disadvantages. However the actual information listing the procedure of the charm, as well as the incantation and criteria that must be met, were all withheld from the book. Now that Harry had thought about it, he seemed to recall that Dumbledore, when speaking about the charm when it was placed on his parents, mentioned that the spell was almost ancient and very obscure. Luckily, the texts from his family library, which were all very old, had the additional information that Harry needed.

Three weeks after he began learning, Harry decided that he had mastered the charm. By then, he had successfully hidden the Dursleys' refrigerator, loo, telephone, front door, car, and entire house from them. It amazed Harry that once the charm was activated, how the Dursleys immediately forgot that there was anything wrong with the scenario of not having a door to their house, or having to shower in the back yard with a hose. Once Harry had his fun and ended the charms, he simply Obliviated the Dursleys and they never knew that something had happened to them.

That also proved easier than Harry had suspected. The Ministry controlled basic Obliviate spell was simple, about as easy as the majority of the third year spells he had learned. It allowed easy removal of all thoughts related to what the caster wanted to Obliviate. There were more advanced versions of the spell, but Harry had only started to practice those, and hadn't had much success yet. Those were the spells that allowed for large memory wipes like the one he had promised his uncle. When a wizard erased such a large portion of memory, it has to be supplemented with new artificial ones, and that's where Harry was having difficulty. The farthest Harry had gotten so far in advanced Obliviation was to make Dudley think he had worn a brazier for the past two years. Harry thought it was quite funny to see him beg his mum endlessly about washing his "unmentionables" for the next day, because he had run out.

Magical theory turned out to be as boring as Harry had feared, but the results from long hours of studying couldn't be denied. In school only basic theory was ever mentioned, but Harry found that learning why a spell worked increased the strength and consistency of his

spellwork. He had never before wondered why pointing a stick and yelling out a word had caused magic, but now he understood. Judging by the results his practice dummies showed, the mixture of practice and studying magical theory increased Harry's magical strength by almost twenty percent in just the first two months.

Learning about theory went hand in hand with Arithmancy, a subject Harry had planned to learn anyways. Technically Arithmancy is the study of magical numbers, but in actuality Harry found it to be much more. It's almost magical algebra. Using advanced theorems and postulates, it is possible to break down a spell into its simplest parts, for easier study. Inversely, it's also possible to modify an existing spell, or create new ones all together, by building new formulas. Harry found the work slow and painful, but the results spoke for themselves. In fact, once he got the basic information out of the way, Harry set a goal in his Arithmancy work. Using the knowledge he had learned, along with what he knew of magical theory, Harry wanted to modify the standard Stunning Spell to allow it to be broken only by its original caster. That way, stunned enemies couldn't be revived by just anyone. At the rate Harry was learning, he estimated it would take a year before he could begin testing the modified stunner. But considering how many of the Death Eaters from the DoM had been stunned only to be revived by later by their allies, Harry felt it was well worth the wait.

The other school subject Harry studied, Potions, he actually found to be enjoyable without Snape hanging over his head. He didn't do much advanced work, but Harry concentrated on reviewing the first five years worth of work instead, and greatly improved upon it. Once he had the basic potion principles down, it was amazing how easy the work became. Simple things like the fact that you couldn't mix dragon's blood with wormwood, or that a bezoar had to be stored in an alcohol base, was the difference between a ruined or perfect potion. Harry wondered why Snape hadn't taught these easy principles from the first day, and couldn't figure it out. One of the books Harry had bought even had a small, simple chart of potion mishaps to avoid, which Harry had never learned. Now he knew why pureblood wizards like Malfoy and Parkinson found potions so much easier than other students; they must have been brought up knowing the simple rules governing correct potion making. It was just like

Snape to take advantage of a muggle-raised wizard's ignorance. No wonder so many non-Slytherins found Potions to be unbearable.

By the end of July, Harry was able to correctly make any potion from his first five years, and had started to read ahead in his sixth year texts. The empty fourth compartment Harry had actually turned into his own potions laboratory. One half of the entire room housed his many cauldrons, ingredients, and finished potions. Harry decided to stockpile useful potions, and they included a variety of sleeping aids, Pepper-Up Potion, Polyjuice Potion, potions to counter the effects of the Cruatius, standard poison antidotes, wit-sharpening potions, and truth serums. The other half of the room was closed off with a conjured curtain, as it was the personal quarters of Dobby and Winky.

Harry had almost forgotten his idea to send Hedwig with a letter to Dobby, but was reminded by his future selves. Telling Hedwig not to let anyone but Dobby see her, Harry requested that Dobby come to Privet Drive for a meeting. When he showed up, in mismatched socks and sixteen knitted caps, he was very happy to see Harry, and that Harry had asked for him. In his own words, "Dobby is most happy to have great wizard Harry Potter sir asking for Dobby to visit!"

It was always a sort of unspoken arrangement, but both of them knew that whenever Harry wanted, Dobby would leave his job at Hogwarts to work for Harry. And now was the time. Harry had told Dobby that he was soon moving to a new home, and that he needed help in setting up the place, and keeping house. Dobby agreed right away, and only paused at the fact that he would be leaving Winky alone at Hogwarts. Once Harry agreed that Winky could come too, Dobby tackled Harry in a hug around his knees, and couldn't have been happier.

Two hours later, once the tiny elf had calmed down some, it was all planned out. Dobby would have increased pay (five galleons a month was the most he'd accept), and time off to be decided latter. Since she wasn't present, Winky would have to work free of charge in the beginning, but Harry wasn't worried. In fact, he'd be surprised if he ever was able to convince her to accept wages. The cover story that the house-elves gave Dumbledore was also quite brilliant; simple, yet misleading. Dobby and Winky were to give a two week notice, telling

Dumbledore that they had found a nice witch family to look after. It was a well known fact that Winky much preferred traditional house-elf work, so Harry didn't think it would raise suspicion. On the off chance that Dobby would get so excited and give away the secret of working for Harry, they decided to drop the notice letter on Dumbledore's desk, and have Dobby avoid the old wizard as much as possible.

The plan worked smoothly, and two weeks later the three Harrys had company in their trunk in the form of two new helpers. Dobby and Winky took over all cleaning and cooking responsibilities, and stayed out of their master's way as much as possible. Considering just the amount of laundry three Harrys provided, it was easy enough. Both elves thought it strange that there were multiple Harrys, but neither questioned it too much. They understood that the trunk was only temporary until the move was made, and the elves spent their free time getting ready for the major changes they would be making to the thirteenth floor. Harry had apparated (yes, he learnt that too) to London's Guild Hall, and had gotten blueprints of the apartment building. He gave Dobby a list of the number and types of rooms he wanted, and left the rest of the design work up to the elves. Hopefully when the time came, they would be ready to make the necessary changes.

Dobby and Winky also helped Harry learn how to better conjure and transfigure large objects. As those were two of the most important skills for house-elves to know, they each were far more experienced than Harry was. And even though their methods were different, they helped Harry learn how to conjure large objects without having them deteriorate in the future. The racks that Harry wanted for his free weights were his first major breakthrough, and took over a week to perfect. Harry's skills at transfiguration also greatly improved. He didn't learn how to transfigure jewels exactly, but Hedwig's perch now looked much more posh. The only thing Harry hadn't started yet was human and advanced animal transfiguration. After watching Dumbledore and Voldemort's duel in the Ministry lobby, Harry knew that both were dead useful as fighting techniques. However, Harry had put off further learning until the second half of the summer. His plan so far called for him to be able to properly decorate his new home, and his skill level now allowed him to do so.

In physical and magical training, Harry dedicated time each day for his workouts. After a daily afternoon jog and workout (one Harry still ran outside, the others on the treadmill), Harry would spend an hour fighting the future versions of himself, using both muggle and magical means. It actually worked out well, as all three Harrys had about the same level of experience, with the older version being only slightly better than the others. His dueling sessions were a bit more extreme than others Harry had seen, as there were three participants, but Harry didn't think that Death Eaters would object to teaming up against him. Harry also didn't have an exact style to his fighting method, so he just improvised. The three Harrys spent time grappling with each other, not throwing any actual blows, but more wrestling and throwing each other around. Had Harry known better, he would have recognized his workouts as a type of Judo, which used an opponent's body weight against them. The few punch and kicks he did practice were directed against the dummies, and their programming showed the physical power put into each hit. Harry may not have as much weight or force behind his blows as Dudley did, but over the month of July, Harry gained a little muscle mass and tone that wasn't there before.

The few times that Harry did hurt himself, either through spell damage or physical injury, the other two Harrys and both house-elves were on hand to give aid. He made good use of the potions supply he kept, and Harry even got to practice reversing curses. The most painful injury so far had been the small splinching accident when Harry had left a few toes behind as he apparated. But given time, that and the rest of the injuries were fully reversed and healed.

And finally, the most important part of Harry's training regiment proved to be the most time consuming as well; Occlumency. Like the physical training, Harry dedicated a portion of each day to meditate and relax, while building his mental shields. Just like Potions, in his limited teachings Snape seemed to have skipped over the basics of Occlumency, and jumped right into the practical lessons. In other subjects Harry might have enjoyed that, but with something as serious as Occlumency, it was important to not skip any steps, and to have a thorough understanding of the fine art.

The many books that Harry read set out different methods for mastering Occlumency. Each method was developed by a different scholar, and not one was more advantageous than another. Harry tried most of them, and eventually settled for a combination of the ones that came easiest for him. To begin, Harry pictured a physical representation of his mind. The image he chose was a sphere, with two separate barriers. The inner barrier housed all his important thoughts. His emotions, his memories, and the parts of himself that Harry didn't want others to know. The outer barrier was just superficial; so intruding Legilimens would think that they had passed Harry's mental defenses. The only thoughts that would exist between the two barriers were unimportant, nonsense memories. The type of things that wouldn't matter if someone found out about. Things like what Harry ate for breakfast, what his grade had been in a pop quiz, etc.

That's where the time consuming part of Occlumency came in. Especially at first, as Harry literally had to sift through every one of his memories and categorize and file them away. Anything that was impersonal; something that he didn't mind someone like Voldemort or Snape to know about; Harry left in the outer layer of his mind sphere. To an outside observer it would seem like the random thoughts of a normal person. The tricky part came when Harry had to work on his mind's inner sphere.

The toughest part was deciding on how many categories, or files, that Harry wanted to include in the inner sphere. Besides the main fact of existing separately from his inconsequential thoughts, Harry learned through trial and error that he had to further categorize his inner sphere. So slowly, over the course of many months, Harry began to group his remaining memories together. His times before Hogwarts were grouped in two; bad memories of the Dursleys, and worse memories of the Dursleys. A more optimistic person might have called them the bad and the good, but Harry knew that the few decent memories he had from that time period were few and far between.

Once Hagrid had delivered his acceptance letter, Harry's memories became more complex. But through trial and error, Harry came to a workable number of categories. All good memories and thoughts, like the ones he had used to summon a Patronus, were all grouped

together. Hagrid delivering his letter, finding out about possibly living with Sirius, flying a broomstick, and so on. Likewise, all his fear and worry, mostly concerning Voldemort, were also grouped together. Another section was his annoyance with people like Malfoy and Snape, etc. Harry didn't really count the number of subsets he created in his mind because he could visualize and almost feel them, and sometimes they even overlapped. In muggle primary school Harry had learned about pie charts and other ways to group information, and what he did in meditation was a highly organized form of just that.

It did cross Harry's mind that using his new pensieve would help facilitate organizing his memories, but more than one book warned against using one. Although the time factor would be cut in half, using a pensieve would cheat a person of the intimacy and familiarity of each remembered memory. A person's mental shields would be much stronger if they had to shift through their own thoughts and relive each memory in their own head, instead of a stone bowl. Besides, Harry still hadn't looked through the memories of whoever "E.R." was, and didn't have the time to begin now.

Once Harry had set up a visualized mental picture, which he referred to as his mind sphere, he began the second part of his Occlumency training. Every night before bed, Harry would spend a good half hour going over the past day. He supposed that this was the part that Snape referred to as "clearing his mind," but it was a lot easier now that Harry had an idea as to how to do that. As he relived each day, and thought about what decisions he had made, what things he had seen, and what accomplishments he had achieved, Harry would file each thought into its appropriate sphere subset. If the memory was trivial, it would be placed in the outer sphere, and would drift randomly with the others. Harry also took this time to adjust his visualizations. He could almost feel if a memory was placed in the wrong subset. He also spent time discovering long forgotten memories; ones he hadn't gone over yet. It would take much time, but by repeating the process every night for four months, by the end of July Harry had a very well organized mind.

The day before his birthday had finally arrived, and it was the day Harry had decided to move out. On a second visit to the apartment

building, he had discovered that the builders were behind schedule, so no one would be moving in or even signing leases until mid August. Harry took the extra time and made sure everything he had practiced was well mastered. The Dursleys proved to be excellent guinea pigs for the most part, and Harry wasn't disappointed that his Uncle Vernon did in fact lose his temper more than once. Harry didn't curse him, but that promise of obliviation flew right out the window. To keep some form of dignity, Vernon forbid Petunia and Dudley from partaking in their well earned rewards. Both actually looked quite glum, but neither wanted to further upset Vernon.

And so it was that in the early afternoon, after packing his trunk with two of himselfs and two elves still inside it, and retuning his bedroom to its original uncomfortable state, Harry grabbed the tail feathers of his pet phoenix and disappeared in flames of white and gold.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Sorry this update took longer than expected, but in writing future chapters I had to make some adjustments to this one. Hope everyone is liking the plot development and the use of the time tuner. I know it's hopelessly confusing to explain the three versions of Harry, but I tried my best to give an explanation while avoiding real confusion. We've all seen those SF films where the characters get lost in explaining time travel, and I didn't want that. My version is what I believe would happen if time travel were possible, and it also happens to coincide with what little was written in PoA. Let me know what you think. If anyone has smart suggestions, I'll gladly update this chapter to include them. On a separate note, I've been getting a few reviews about my writing style, and how I seem to be dragging along. Sorry if I am, but like I said on my bio page, a high school senior has more writing experience than I do. Frankly, I'm surprised at how well everything is turning out so far. Once I finish the story, or come to a nice middle point, I might go back to seriously edit, but for now I won't. If I get too caught up in edits and revisions, I'll lose the fun I'm having with the story, and that's the reason for me writing it. Next chapter, Harry moves to his new digs, sets up shop, and has a very happy birthday. But will his friend's owls be able to find him? I haven't decided yet.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 9 – Birthday Surprises

Harry and Hedwig arrived a moment later in the narrow hallway of the thirteenth floor of the apartment building he had spotted earlier in the summer, right in front of the lift. Harry hadn't been to this floor before, and it was a little different from the others he had seen. Instead of three apartments on either side on the hallway, for a total of six on the whole floor, there were four doors on the east side of the building. A quick peek inside the unlocked doors told him why.

The four flats were smaller, yet more elegant than the others he had seen. Although it was largely a waste, as Harry would have to tear down most of the walls and change the entire floor plan, he thought some of the appliances might be salvageable. All the flats, not just the nicer ones, were at a state of near completion. The walls hadn't yet been painted, and some of the carpets weren't installed, but those were the only things missing as far as Harry could tell. He felt once again extremely lucky to have found such a nice place to live, and at such an opportune time.

"Well Hedwig," he turned to his pet phoenix, "time to get started, huh?"

Hedwig hooted in agreement as Harry took out his miniaturized trunk and enlarged it. He opened the second compartment to retrieve Hedwig's perch, and set it out for her. Now that Hedwig had her "supervisor chair" to use, he could begin the real work.

"Dobby! Winky!" Harry called. "We're here. Are you ready?"

Two small pops announced the arrival of the house-elves. Even though they were inside his trunk, their unique brand of magic allowed them to enter and exit without using the trunk lid or portals. Winky was still a bit shy around her new master, but Dobby had no such qualms.

"Yes Mr. Harry Potter sir, we is both ready! Dobby has plans all set, and Winky will be helping Dobby sir. Is there anything sir wants added before Dobby begins?"

Harry thought for a moment. The plans he had discussed with the elves were a guideline at best, and could easily be changed. The entire floor was much larger than Harry needed, or could even imagine using, so a last minute change wouldn't mess up his plans.

"Yes Dobby. Please leave that corner flat as it is." Harry took the time to point out one of the lavish flats to the excited house elf. "We'll work on it later, but for now leave it. I'm going to work on the Fidelius Charm, but you and Winky can go ahead and start with the modifications. I'll be about a half hour I suspect."

Dobby was bouncing with excitement. "Oh, Dobby is so happy that Mr. Harry Potter sir is trusting Dobby and Winky to make changes themselves! A great wizard indeed. Dobby will not disappoint Mr. Harry Potter, Dobby and Winky swear."

Winky nodded and clapped her hands as well. Even though she wasn't as strange as Dobby himself, she had over the years been infected by his quirks. Harry supposed that she was rubbing off on Dobby herself. The elves seemed to be a good influence on each other, and each had different talents and traits that complemented the other. Once again, Harry praised himself for thinking of hiring the two to work for him. Without their help, things would be much more difficult.

"I know you won't disappoint me; I trust you both." Harry pressed the down button to call the lift. "Go ahead and start, and when I come back, we'll finish up together."

The two elves nodded their teary-eyed heads, and each took off into a separate door. A minute later the lift appeared, and Harry took it to the floor below to begin the work that would make him a secret keeper.

The Fidelius Charm, as Harry had already found out, wasn't as difficult as he thought it would be. In fact, with the exception of being time consuming and obscure, it was almost too easy. And as Harry had already completed the most difficult parts, all that was left to do was placing the runes and casting the spell.

The first thing to do was find the four corners of the twelfth floor, right below the area Harry wanted to hide. In each corner, where the walls met the ceiling, Harry used his wand (not his new one) to trace the outlines of specific runes in the air. Weeks ago Harry had completed the Arithmancy formulas for the apartment floor, taking into account total cubic footage, magical interference, and other factoring measurements. The output of the Arithmancy problems corresponded to a chart of ancient runes in one of the Fidelius books Harry had found in his family's belongings, and that's what he was carving out now. Each rune combination; a different set for each of the four corners of the building related to direction; appeared in the air in red and silver writing. Once done with all four corners, Harry returned to the lift.

A short ride later, Harry repeated the process on the ground corners of the fourteenth floor, casting the same four rune sets in the corresponding corners. The idea was that the charm would hide the total area between the sets of runes. Since Harry had placed the runes on the twelfth and fourteenth floors, the floor between them would be targeted. The doors on this floor were locked for some reason, but four simple 'Alohamoras' granted Harry access. His work was almost complete, and Harry made one more visit to the lift.

This time, instead of pressing any buttons, Harry turned to the mirrored wall inside the small lift, and raised his wand to his own head. Tracing a fifth design, this one tying together the other four, Harry touched the wand to his forehead, and runes appeared. Harry was careful to avoid his curse scar because he didn't know if there would be any side effects, but the left side of his forehead had plenty of room for the small rune.

The fifth design wasn't red like the others, but was as black as night, with silver glitters. With one last deep breath, Harry pointed the wand to the side of his head, and while concentrating on the thirteenth floor he wanted to hide, spoke the incantation to the Fidelius Charm.

"*Occulto Fidelius Invisus!*"

At first he didn't think anything had happened, but slowly the black rune marking faded from his forehead, until soon it was gone. If Harry

needed any more convincing, he got it. When he went to press the ground floor button of the lift, he noticed with amazement that the thirteenth floor button was indeed gone.

'Well I'll be damned!' He thought to himself. "It worked! It really worked!" Although he had practiced the charm at the Dursleys', there was a huge difference in hiding a door and hiding an entire floor of a building. Casting a quick glamour on himself, one that unfortunately only worked on muggles, Harry made his way to the front office, and was greeted once again by the same woman manager he had met before.

He pretended to be interested in leasing a flat, and was presented with the same facts he had already heard. The building's opening date had changed some, but otherwise the speech was the same. Harry asked if he could see a model, and the two made their ways back to the lift.

For his part, Harry didn't really need to see the model again; he just wanted to see if the manager noticed anything wrong or suspicious with the number of floor buttons in the lift. She didn't. The model tour was quick, and almost verbatim what it was before. On the lift ride down, Harry asked if a unit on the thirteenth floor was available. He said it was his lucky number.

"Thirteenth floor? Sorry, but as you can see we don't have one. That's pretty common. But if you're interested in the fourteenth floor, which is really the thirteenth of course, I may be able to...."

Harry tuned the woman out. He struggled to keep a straight face, but inside he was grinning like a mad man. It really had worked, and he didn't even need to use a memory charm on anyone. The Fidelius Charm hid all knowledge of the thirteenth floor, not just its physical representation. And if it worked on the building manager, it had probably worked on everyone else as well.

To be sure, Harry followed the woman back to her office and cast a sleeping charm on her while she wasn't looking. While she slept, Harry had a quick look around the office. In the file cabinets, in the

computer files, and everywhere else in the office, there was no mention of the seven apartments on the thirteenth floor.

The lobby too was affected by the Fidelius Charm. Several mailboxes had gone missing, and left no trace of their existence. Harry ran to the basement, and found more good news. There were no meters for the missing floor. Electric, water, gas; all the meters were gone. Harry knew that if he concentrated hard enough on them they would appear, but he was too excited to focus.

After running back upstairs, and remembering to cancel the sleeping charm on the building manager, Harry made his last trip of the day to the elevator. Once the doors closed, Harry thought of his two small friends.

“Dobby? Winky? Can you come down here please?” Although the two elves weren’t in the immediate area, Harry had learned that house elves had a sixth sense about their masters. If they were close enough, and their masters called, the elves would come.

Two “pops” later, Dobby and Winky appeared in the lift with Harry. This time Winky spoke.

“Yes Mr. Harry Potter sir? Winky and Dobby are almost done with first part of plans. Is there something you be needing from Winky, sir?”

Harry almost laughed out loud. While Winky was doing her best to be a good house-elf and serve her master, Dobby was busy making faces at himself in the mirrored wall, and was ignoring them both. His bat-like ears and long pointed nose made for some interesting poses.

Once he got the giggles out of him, he began to speak and Dobby turned to face him. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I need your help testing something.”

Dobby lunged for Harry’s knees, which Harry had come to expect at least once a day. “Oh, Mr. Harry Potter is too good a wizard to need Dobby’s help! But Dobby and Winky will do whatever Mr. Harry sir says!”

Harry gently took Dobby by the shoulders and pushed him away so he could face the elf. "Dobby, I just need a small favor. Can you and Winky go back and bring me my trunk? I need something from it, and you can pop much quicker than I can get there."

Winky spoke for them both. "Yes Mr. Harry sir, Winky and Dobby will pop and get your trunk, and be back soon." She then grabbed Dobby's hand and the two disappeared with a snap of her fingers.

Harry waited patiently in the lift, hoping that the house-elves wouldn't be able to find his trunk. If his research was right, not even house-elves would be able to break through the charm. And sure enough, about a half minute later, the two returned, worry clearly written on their faces.

"I is sorry sir, but Winky cannot find your trunk. Winky not know how, but can't get back home!" Dobby was bashing his head against the wall, and Harry had to restrain him from further damage.

"Don't worry Winky, Dobby. I didn't expect you to be able to get back, I was just testing the charm. It seems that I cast it correctly, I just had to make sure. Listen up, and I'll show you how to get back."

Harry turned to face the bank of floor buttons by the lift door. And concentrated. He didn't have to read from a slip of paper since he was his own secret keeper, but he still had to think of his home's location. And for Dobby and Winky's sake, he spoke the catchphrase aloud. "Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor."

And just as the building of number twelve Grimmauld Place had sprung into existence the summer before, a button appeared out of thin air, nudging the others out of its way, labeled "13."

"See guys," he said as he pushed the button, "all you have to do is to concentrate. Both stairwells work the same way. If you stand between the twelfth and fourteenth floor doors, and concentrate or read 'Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor,' a door will spring up in the wall. For you two, before you pop, make sure you're thinking about it in your minds, and you should be able to get there."

Neither house elf look much convinced.

Harry laughed. "Just try it. Pop back home, and I'll be there in a sec. Just don't forget to concentrate."

Dobby and Winky nodded, and took each other's hands again. Both elves closed their eyes and squinted their faces, and this time it was Dobby who snapped his fingers. The two disappeared, and greeted Harry with smiling faces when the lift door opened up.

The elves had been busy while Harry was gone, and the floor was hardly recognizable. The one posh flat still stood in the far right corner away from the lift, but that was the only enclosed unit on the entire floor. The rest was all open space, with no walls or support beams in sight. The two elves had removed all the inner structures, and charmed the ceiling to not cave in. With no walls in sight, and the eighteen foot vaulted ceilings, the flat now had a loft feeling to it. Actually, Harry didn't know what to call it. It was too big to call a "flat," but because it was part of a larger building, it couldn't be called a "house" either. Home was the best Harry could come up with.

The elves hadn't stopped at removing the walls either. They had also removed all the carpeting, so now the whole area was done in hardwood flooring to match what was already in the kitchens. All the window treatments had similarly been removed, as well as the hanging light fixtures. All the electric appliances (stoves, ovens, dishwashers, etc.) had been grouped together in the middle of the space, and for the first time Harry wondered what he was going to do with six each of the muggle appliances.

Harry turned to Dobby and Winky. "Very good guys, you did a great job." And they had, for now Harry could begin work. He had wanted to make the space his own, as it would be his first real home. The elves had provided him with a blank canvas, now it was up to him to create.

Taking off his shirt and holsters, Harry removed the heavy dragon hide vest he always wore underneath. The pants and boots he only wore once in a while to break them in, but the vest was now a part of him like his glasses had once been. Over the past couple months it had grown soft and flexible, and contoured to Harry's torso like a

second skin. The tight parts had stretched out, and the loose areas had been filled in with the little muscle Harry had put on. In public he never would have removed the vest, but in the confines of his new home, with a lot of work ahead of him, Harry wanted to be as comfortable as possible. Besides, without the air conditioning on, it would get hot! When Dobby and Winky had removed all the walls, they had temporarily removed all the electrical wiring as well. Studying the building's plans had taught them a little about electricity, gas lines, and plumbing. Harry wouldn't be able to reattach all the electrical appliances until the new walls were up.

Before he put his shirt back on, Harry caught a quick glance at the tattoo of Prongs over his shoulder. Since he got the marks, his guardian tattoos had shown very little behavior. Sometimes they visited each other, but most of the time they just stayed in their own place, and didn't do anything. Harry had stopped long ago trying to figure out what type of magical properties they might have. Since all three tattoos were on his back, Harry had no problems putting them out of his mind, and sometimes forgot about them altogether.

Once he put his shirt back on, he started the real work. Using his wand to mark lines along the floor, Harry began to mark off rooms according to the plans he now held in his hand. The majority of the area was left open aired, only bed and bathrooms were to be separated. In each marked off area, Harry wrote the name of the room, and checked off his list as he went along. The elves erected walls in the appropriate places, and worked their magic to rearrange water pipes, electric wiring, and air ducts in the newly formed walls. One of the many advantages of living in the muggle world was access to electricity, and Harry had no plans to ignore it. And because his new home wouldn't be as saturated with magic as Hogwarts was, it would work properly too. Many hours later, and after a few redesigns, the floor plan was complete. There was no furniture or decorations yet, but that would come with time.

Right in front of the lift door was a comfortable sitting area, elevated above the main floor level. Two steps down opened into what Harry began calling his "great room." It ran a third of the length of the building, was the entire width, and had no walls anywhere. So many years of living in a claustrophobic cupboard had left Harry with the

want for big, open spaces. The middle area, right in front of the lift, would be left empty, sort of as a front hall. The left side, against the near wall was an intact kitchen.

Dobby and Winky had salvaged the kitchen hardware and cabinets, and had rearranged them so that both Harry and themselves could reach everything. A full set of stainless steel, industrial-sized kitchen appliances were set into the cabinets, and a large island floated in the middle of the space, with a butcher's block countertop. A small pantry was at the end of the kitchen cabinets, but was charmed to be much larger. The kitchen was separated from the front hall area with a long bar-like counter, about four feet high, that ran the entire length of the kitchen. There was access at both ends, along the elevator wall and opposite, and Harry planned to transfigure some barstools later to finish the effect.

Beyond the kitchen, again along the left wall of the building, was an informal eating area. With easy access to the kitchen, Harry pictured himself eating most meals there, and wanted it to be cozy. He had marked off a space for a circular table and five chairs, and made sure to leave enough room for additional furniture he might want to add later. The space that was left over was marked off by Harry as a small room, but he wouldn't tell Dobby and Winky what it was for.

Opposite the kitchen, along the building's right wall, Harry left space for the main living room area. There would be plenty of room for armchairs and comfortable sofas, as well as low tables, cabinets, and anything else Harry might want to include. The space he marked off was nearly double the size of the living room in his trunk, and even that was large enough to be extravagant.

Besides the living area, Harry left room for a formal dining table. He marked it off like he had the circular table, only this one was long and rectangular, and could seat up to ten people. He had no plans to use it anytime in the immediate future, but he might need to entertain a large group one day. Even if it was only the entire Weasley family, Harry would need the room. Like before, he made sure to leave space for a few cabinets and serving tables, so the area wouldn't ever be cramped. There was no divider between the dining table and the living room area, but Harry decided to figure that out later. When

he was done, the dining area and living room together was the same length of the kitchen, eating area, and small room along the other wall.

In the middle of the room, directly facing the lift door, Dobby and Winky had crafted a gigantic fireplace. It had to be large enough to heat the entire room, as well as tall enough to allow floo travel. If there was one thing about fireplaces Harry hated, it was small ones that he bumped his head on when exiting. No, his home would have a massive hearth. The fireplace also broke up the room a bit, as its gigantic frame blocked the dining room's view from the informal eating area, and vice versa. The fireplace was crafted in dark grey flagstone, but otherwise left plain. There was no mantelpiece yet, but Harry would make one later.

The fireplace essentially split the big room in two, and intentionally created a fork in the road. To either side of the fireplace was a long hallway, which both ran the remainder of the length of the floor. To further accentuate the split path, Harry marked off a Y-shaped hallway on the ground, and conjured some tile for it. Soon the tile path started at the lift entrance, and sloped down the steps into the front hall area. It enclosed the space around the fireplace's hearth, and branched off to the two separate hallways. The kitchen, dining area, and living room still all had their original hardwood floors; only the path was covered in Harry's conjured tiles.

The right hallway, along the east side of the building, became Harry's personal domain. He marked off walls that ran the entire length of the building, so the hallway became a long straight one. Eventually, the hallway was completed, and Harry began calling it the east wing to not confuse himself. The east wing had three doorways on the right side of the hallway, and four along the left.

The first room on the right side of the wing was what Harry would come to call his "muggle room." It was empty so far, but Harry had plans to put all things muggle inside, some of the joys he was never allowed at the Durselys'. He knew right away that he wanted a large television, stereo, and billiard table, but otherwise hadn't any plans.

The muggle room had a connecting door to the next room along the hallway; Harry's master suite. It was just a little larger than the

bedroom in his trunk, but Harry planned to set it up the same way. He'd come to like the large room, as his multiple selves had been sleeping there for over three months.

The last door on the right side of the hallway was the posh apartment he had the elves leave standing. The two bedroom flat had much smaller rooms than the rest of his new place, but Harry thought it might be nice to have a private guest house. Plus he could always use magic to enlarge the rooms. It was totally separate from the rest of the place, had its own kitchen and living quarters, and even had its own entrance. Right outside the flat's door, at the end of the hallway, was the door to the first of the two stairwells.

Along the opposite wall, were four smaller rooms and one huge space. Each of the rooms was half the width of the space between the two hallways, and the four small rooms were pushed back towards the north side of the building, opposite the elevator. The far room Harry used for storage, and that's where he put all the extra appliances and hardware he hadn't used. The next room Harry would make into an exercise/weight room. He didn't know whether to get more equipment or to just move the stuff already in his trunk, but the room was there. Likewise, the third small room he would set up as a Dueling chamber, an almost exact match to the one in his trunk. The only difference was the lack of practice dummies hanging from the walls. The forth room, because he couldn't think of anything, Harry left empty for now.

The huge space that remained, behind the large fireplace and spanning the remainder of the length of the building, Harry made into his library. It was twice as wide as the four small rooms, because Harry wanted it opened to both hallways, so he could pass through if he wanted. There were no doors, but one large archway in the middle of the east side of the library.

The other hallway lined in tile, along the west side of the building, Harry only had a few plans for. He knew he wanted some guest rooms in case of future company, but didn't know how many to make. Because he could always change them later, and because he had a ridiculous amount of space to work with, Harry decided on six. The six guest rooms, each with their own en suite bathroom, lined the

west wing of the building, also pushed back against the north wall. There were three rooms to a side, with the second stairwell at the end of the hallway just like in the east wing.

The library took up the remaining space along the left side of the hallway, and was accessible by two small open archways on either side of the room. It was a nice contrast to the single larger archway on the opposite wall.

The remaining space, between the kitchen area and the three guest rooms along the building's west side, Harry didn't have much use for. He still wouldn't tell the elves what the small room he had made next to the eating area was for, and ordered them not to enter it. Behind that room, the first door on the left in the west wing, was a nice sized laundry. There was plenty room for one of the washer/dryer combinations that came with the building, with enough room left over for some cabinets, and space for the two house-elves to bunk for the night. There was also a slop sink for messy clean-ups, a broom cupboard for mops and brooms, and a laundry line for hanging clothes to dry. Seven years of helping his Aunt Petunia with the laundry had taught Harry that not all things could be machine washed. He hadn't made permanent arrangements with the elves yet, and wanted to be able to do his own laundry if needed.

The rest of the space, a bit larger than the guest quarters (but not by much), Harry dived into two smaller rooms and left empty. Like the single room in the east wing, he didn't know what to do with it yet, so he left it for later.

All in all, Harry was very pleased with his new home. And that's what it was now, not just "the thirteenth floor" of some apartment building. It was still very empty and needed much work, but the start was good.

After the many hours of hard work, Harry, Dobby, and Winky retired to the smaller kitchen in Harry's trunk to have dinner. Now that all the water pipes and electrical wiring was hooked up again, the kitchen appliances were all running properly, but there was still no food. Winky could have conjured them up a meal, but all three were exhausted after a full day of creating a new home. So the elves made a quick meal, and Harry was thankful. Since their arrival the meals

had been much improved. They weren't up to Hogwart's standards, but were close. And Harry was no longer limited by the few staples Leeds had been able to stock the pantry and icebox with. Dobby and Winky had frowned at the lack of foodstuffs, and had been quick to re-charm the kitchen to provide whatever foods Harry wanted.

After the filling meal, the three left the trunk, and admired their handy work. With Harry's permission Dobby and Winky retired for the night, and made themselves comfortable in the laundry. Harry himself conjured a modest daybed in the living room area, and leaned up against the wall as he surveyed the large room.

It still didn't feel like his. Prior to his new home (it was too large to be called a flat), his Firebolt was the most expensive thing Harry had owned. It had taken weeks for him to get over the surreal feeling of owning a top-of-the-line racing broom. He wondered how long it would take for him to accept that the home was his. And with these thoughts, Harry drifted off to sleep.

"Wormtail, let them in!" An evil high-pitched voice spoke from a large ornamental chair, ordering the short plump man who kneeled on the floor. Although he sat facing the room, his face was shrouded unnaturally in shadows.

"Yes master, right away." The short man, once known as Peter Pettigrew, now called the lackey of the Dark Lord, sniveled his way to the door to let the Death Eaters in. These four had been missing from the fold for weeks now, but had finally come home.

The leader of the four, a tall man with wisps of long blonde hair showing behind his white mask stepped in front of the others, and kneeled before the man, while kissing the hem of his robes.

"My Lord; you called for us, and we come to serve."

Voldemort, for that is who he was, paused before he spoke. "Yes, I can see that Lucius. But why haven't you come before? This isn't the first time I've called for you."

"I apologize master, but although we have been found innocent of our crimes, Dumbledore and his allies still keep a close watch on our

actions. I thought it would be prudent to lay low for awhile, especially until the trials were over."

Lucius Malfoy was perhaps the only Death Eater with enough nerve to go against the Dark Lord's wishes, and he hoped Voldemort would surely see the logic in his actions.

"You're lucky I need you alive Lucius! Because of you and your men, not only did I not get the prophecy, but six of my most faithful servants are back in Azkaban; though not for much longer." Voldemort was working up a full head of steam now. "If not for the facts that I need your money, and you still have some pull with that idiot Minister, I would have done away with you by now!"

Lucius Malfoy knew enough to look ashamed. Even though the fiasco at the Department of Mysteries was only partially his fault, to argue now would be asking for a death sentence. "Yes master. I'm sorry, I won't fail you again."

Voldemort sneered. "You better not. Nott, Avery, Macnair! You three also didn't answer my summons. What is your excuse?"

The other three Death Eaters looked at each other quickly, each conveying that none wanted to answer. Finally Macnair stepped forward. To keep Voldemort waiting would be worse than answering any question.

"My Lord," he said, "we too thought it best to wait. We wanted to come serve you, but were followed until the trials ended last week. This has been the first summons we received since."

Voldemort didn't look pleased. "So you let a few of Dumbledore's men bother you and kept me waiting? Why didn't you just kill them? I may need Lucius, but you three don't have that excuse. Don't disobey me again! CRUCIO!"

Faster than they noticed, Voldemort had drawn his wand, and now had it trained on the three screaming wizards. Although the spell's strength was weakened from being cast on more than a single person, Avery, Nott, and Macnair suffered in indescribable agony for nearly

two minutes. Lucius's face remained empty of emotions, but inwardly smiled with relief that he wasn't part of the group.

When Voldemort ended the spell, he turned his attention back to Lucius while the others composed themselves. Wormtail just quivered in a corner.

"I still haven't heard all the details of that night. Bellatrix told me most, but I understand you split up at some point. Tell me what you saw. And Lucius, pray tell that what you say pleases me."

So Malfoy told his master all that he could remember, about how Potter had more than just his two friends with him. That was a large part of why the plan fell apart. Lucius and the other Death Eaters had planned on Harry showing up alone, or at most with only Ron and Hermione. Draco hadn't told his father that Potter was close with anyone else, so it surprised all the Death Eaters that instead of three, six students had shown up.

Lucius also told of the problem caused by the prophecy sphere. Because Potter waived it around in his hand like a toy, it was hard to attack the boy. Lucius had been told at all costs not to let the prophecy be destroyed, so he took great pleasure in telling Voldemort that it was Bellatrix that had finally caused it to be broken.

"Yes," Voldemort retorted, "I have already punished Bellatrix for that. She's recuperating right now, but might be strong enough to rejoin our efforts in a few more days." Lucius didn't want to think of the torture the woman had gone through to render her incapacitated. "Did you recognize any of the others with Potter?"

"Yes master, but only two. One of the other females had red hair, so I suppose it was the youngest Weasley. It would make sense, since her brother was there as well. I believe the Longbottom boy was with them as well. Bellatrix took great pleasure in teasing him about his parents. The last female I did not recognize. It was too dark, and I was concentrating on Potter."

Voldemort turned to the three other wizards, who had just regained their composure from the pain curse. "How about you three? Did any of you recognize the remaining female?"

Macnair, Nott, and Avery shook their heads, and by the angry look on Voldemort's face, they began to prepare themselves for another round with the Cruciatus.

"Incompetent; the lot of you! Six teenagers go up against ten fully trained Death Eaters, and not only do you fail to best them, but you get captured as well! And now, you can't even tell me who all of them were!"

The three thought it best not to argue about the Order members being present. Voldemort reached for his wand once more, but this time he was interrupted.

"But Lord, I have some news you might like!" Lucius cried out over his master's rage. "The prophecy! Before it was lost, I found out some interesting news."

Voldemort lowered his wand at mention of the prophecy, and forgot about cursing the wizards again. "What Lucius? What did it say? Bellatrix said none of you heard it?"

Malfoy had been waiting for this moment. Although he had failed in the mission of bringing the prophecy back to his master, he had learned some valuable information that might be important. He only hoped that Bellatrix was either too stupid, crazy, or afraid to realize how valuable the information was.

"Sorry Master, but I didn't hear what the prophecy said." He would have paused to explain, but Voldemort looked mad enough to kill. "But I did learn something else! No one else heard the prophecy either! This whole time we thought that Potter knew of it, but he had no idea. The only reason he came to the Ministry that night was to rescue his godfather! It looks like your plan of infiltrating his mind worked! He didn't even know that the Ministry kept records of prophecies, or that one was made about him. When I first confronted him, Potter was as ignorant as a muggle! And he didn't hear the

prophecy either when it broke, I'm sure of it." Lucius was speaking to save his life now. If he could convince Voldemort that it was valuable information; that he had accessed Potter's mind successfully, and that the prophecy was still unknown to him; then maybe he could garner some favor with the Dark Lord.

And he was right. Although Voldemort wouldn't admit it, least of all to his subordinates, he had not known that his plan had worked perfectly. When he planted the images of Sirius in the Ministry in Harry's dreams, he only felt a base connection, and hadn't known how successful the image transfer had been. Throughout the year the connection had gotten stronger, and Voldemort had even been able to somewhat control Potter's actions and emotions a few times, but Lucius's information was the only proof at how successful he had been. The news did indeed calm him down.

"So you're saying Lucius, that Potter has no idea of what the prophecy speaks of?" Voldemort raised his hairless eyebrow in question.

Malfoy smiled. He had gotten through. "No Master, he doesn't. He didn't even know the prophecy existed till that night. And although Dumbledore could tell him at any time; if he hadn't before, why would he tell Potter now?"

Voldemort joined Lucius in his smile. "Why indeed? Even if the old fool does tell Potter now, the information will be so new and unsettling that I might be able to pry it from his weak mind. And if Dumbledore decides to keep the information secret, there are other ways find out about it."

Voldemort was happy. Things hadn't gone as planned, and he had wasted almost an entire year of his time planting false visions in Potter's head, but things were looking up. The prophecy might still be unknown to Harry, and as long as it was, Voldemort's plans remained unchanged. Without knowing what the prophecy spoke of, Voldemort was cautious of taking a more public role in the wizarding world. His ambition and overconfidence had caused his downfall before, and he wouldn't let it happen again. Yet, if Potter didn't know what was prophesized either, than things remained hopeful. He would still be

cautious, but Voldemort now knew that his enemy lacked information as well. And as information was power, the playing field was leveled once again.

"Lucius, new plans," he ordered. "Keep watch over Potter's residence and that of his friends. Don't make yourselves known, but watch closely and gather information. Dumbledore's men should be around as well, so be careful. Intercept some owls if you can, and send Wormtail in to spy if possible. I want to know if Potter knows of the prophecy, and who the other mystery student is. If your son thinks he can help, then let him. He's proved useful before. Report back as soon as you know something. Walden, Avery, Nott; you're with Lucius. You should thank me for allowing you a final chance to prove yourselves." Voldemort was eager to restart his campaign to cleanse the magical world of muggle blood, but until he knew for sure that the information contained in the prophecy was no longer an issue, and could not be used against him, Voldemort decided he should bide his time. He had learned much patience in the past decade, and a little while longer wouldn't jeopardize his ultimate plans.

The three nodded and mumbled thank yous. Malfoy bowed once last time to his master, kissed his robes again, and turned to leave. He had much planning to do.

"Oh, and Lucius," Voldemort called out to him halfway to the door. "Don't fail me again. CRUCIO!"

"Ahhhh!" Harry woke to his own screams, with a palm pressed to the burning scar on his head. By his watch it was past three in the morning, and Harry remembered every word of the recent vision.

In fact, the dream was more vivid than any other he had had before. Not only did he know the words spoken and Voldemort's emotional state, but Harry almost had a sense of what he was thinking. It was kind of like what he felt when Hedwig sang to him, but with a much darker taint.

So as not to forget one detail, Harry quickly conjured a piece of parchment and muggle pencil, and wrote down the dream as best he could remember. While he wrote, he considered why the dream had been so vivid. It was possible that his connection to Voldemort was

growing in strength, like the dark wizard had suggested, but Harry didn't think so. All last year, his insight hadn't grown any, only Voldemort's influence towards him. Harry thought rather it was his Occlumency training. By having a greater understanding of his own mind, Harry thought that it only made sense he would also have a heightened sense of awareness about images that didn't belong in his head. Foreign thoughts if you will. The little he had read about Legilimency confirmed his opinion, but it was still too early to tell. Once Harry studied Legilimency more in depth, he would know for sure.

As he finished writing down his dream, he noticed a small tapping noise behind him. It was too dark to see anything, so Harry fished his wand out of his holster and cast Lumos. Directing the light against the glass window, he was surprised by a flock of owls trying to get inside. Most were strangers, but Harry did recognize one tiny owl in the dim light as it tried multiple times to fly through the glass pane.

"Pig you stupid bird!" Harry wasn't angry, but was amused instead. In the excitement of redesigning his new home, he had forgotten that it was now his birthday. He looked to find a way to open the window, but found they didn't open. Being on one of the building's top floors, that made sense, but it didn't help the tired groups of post owls flapping in the wind. "Hang on guys! I'll figure out something."

Now fully awake, Harry went to the wall and flipped on the overhead lights. Dobby and Winky had removed all the hanging light fixtures, but they had left the spotlights in the vaulted ceiling. They didn't provide much atmosphere, but there was sufficient light to see. It seemed all the windows in the big room were the same, so Harry couldn't manually open any of them. Magically though, he could. With a wave of his wand, the glass pane disappeared, letting in eight owls.

Right away Harry grabbed Pig out of the air and untied his parcel. The tiny owl was always easily excitable, and Harry wasn't in the mood to have him upset the other owls while waiting for replies.

"Sorry Pig, but you got to go home now. I'll send my reply with Errol. Bye!" With that said, Harry threw the small owl back out the window, and replaced the missing window pane with another wave of his

wand. It would take awhile to open all the letters and parcels, and then to write responses. Harry didn't want to leave the window open to the early morning draft in the mean time.

The owls he did recognize, beside Pig, were Errol, Dumbledore's small bird, and a well known school owl. The others weren't known to him, and there was even a hawk in the group. At first Harry had mistaken it for a black owl, but upon closer inspection the dark bird was much larger and more predatory than any owl could ever be. 'Must be from Hagrid,' he thought.

One by one the owls (and hawk) landed on Harry's outstretched arm to deliver their messages. Errol almost fell in his lap, and released assorted gifts from the Weasley family. A medium sized tawny owl must have been rented from a post office, because Hermione's neat handwriting was on the outside of that envelope, and Harry knew she didn't have her own owl. The hawk did indeed come from Hagrid, and carried a large square parcel for him. A distinguished looking horned owl surprised Harry, as it had a letter and small package from Neville with it. The school owl had a thick envelope which he assumed must be his Hogwart's letter, and Dumbledore's small owl likewise had a similar package. The last bird, a tired looking barn owl, was the only one Harry couldn't figure out. It was that package Harry decided to open first.

After conjuring a few perches and water bowls for the birds, and summoning the last of Hedwig's owl treats (she wouldn't eat them anymore), Harry sat on the floor amidst the many parcels and parchments to go through them all. The tiredness he had felt at waking up from Voldemort's vision was now entirely gone.

The first letter turned out to be from Remus, and a light went off in Harry's head as he noticed how tired and worn out the owl that had delivered the letter looked. It was amazing at how some people resembled their pets. The letter read....

Dear Harry,

I know we just saw each other, but Happy Birthday! Sorry I couldn't get you much, but I've been busy these last few weeks, and the gift I had planned on needs some more work still. It was something that

Sirius and I decided to give you together months ago, but now it doesn't seem right without him. I haven't totally given up on it yet, I just need to change some things. In the meantime, enjoy the chocolate I sent, and I suspect I'll be seeing you again in a few days.

Remus

Harry was pleased to find a large bar of Honeyduke's Finest Chocolate, and remembered the first time Remus had given him a piece. It was on the Hogwart's Express during third year when Dementors had searched the train. He sure had come a long way since then.

Harry had no idea what gift he and Sirius had planned on getting him, but was touched that the two had thought about his birthday as far back as a few months ago. He would just have to wait and find out, as Remus said that he hadn't given up on the idea of the gift. Harry also wondered what Remus said about seeing him in a few days. It probably meant that he was planning on visiting Harry again, and boy would he be in a surprise to find an empty Privet Drive!

Hagrid's package was the largest, so Harry decided to open that next. Wading through his horrible handwriting, Harry managed to make out that Hagrid was traveling abroad again, and wished him a happy birthday from the road. He had sent his normal batch of rocks cakes, and a large wizard painting he had found in a small town in Germany. It was a portrait of a thestral, and was quite artfully done. Many thought it bad luck to be able to see a thestral properly, but Harry knew that wasn't so. He had even flown one from Hogwarts to the Ministry building, and Hagrid must have heard about it. Leave it to him to give Harry a gift having something to do with "dangerous beasts." Still, the painting was a nice one and Harry planned on letting Hagrid know he liked it.

Neville's note was short and to the point. It sounded much like his previous letters, and again thanked Harry for his extra help the past year. To show his appreciation, he had sent Harry an advanced book on defensive dueling techniques which he thought Harry might like. In truth, Harry was already very familiar with most of the spells in the book, but the thought was nice. Remembering that it was his birthday

too, Harry made a mental note to wish Neville a belated happy birthday, and to send the book he had bought with his return letter. Harry had originally planned on giving it to the boy at school, but thought as a birthday gift it would be more thoughtful.

Ron's note was next in line, and it was amusing in a childlike manner. It read....

Dear Harry,

How's it going mate! I know it must be dreadful to have to spend your birthday with the muggles, but I'm sure a few gifts will ease the pain. In case they're not feeding you enough, Mum is sending some meat pies. Everything's the same here, and the whole family is going back to the place from last summer a week from now. I'm trying to get Mum to convince Dumbledore to let you stay with us, but he hasn't said yes yet. Have you heard from Hermione at all? She's starting her trip in a few days, and won't tell me where she's going. Do you reckon' she's finally going to visit Krum? I'd bet ol' Vicky would just love to see his "Her-my-own-ninny" again. If you hear from her, tell her to keep away from that twit! I still think he's bad news. Anyway, Happy Birthday! See you soon.

Your Best Mate,

Ron

The small parcel he had grabbed from Pig earlier contained two gifts. One was a rolled up Chudley Cannons poster in a particularly awful shade of orange. The other was a box of chocolate frogs, with one missing. It had a small note in it that said, "Sorry mate, but I got hungry! I owe you one. – Ron" Harry laughed. The day Ron wasn't hungry would be the day that he kissed Malfoy.

Hermione's letter didn't mention anything about visiting Krum, but she did have a few choice words to say about Ron.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday. I'm sorry if I sound in a bad mood, but I just got done reading a letter from Ron, and that boy drives me crazy! Do you know he actually demanded I give him an itinerary of the vacation I'm going

to take with my parents? It's like he thinks I can't look after myself, and I need him to check up on me. Argghhh!

Anyway, sorry to ramble on, but my parents don't know what Ron's like, and they just agree with whatever I say. I hope you've been having a good summer so far, and that you're really studying those books you bought. Because you said you were, I decided to forgo my usual gift of a book, and get you something else instead. I hope you like it. I'm sorry I won't be around to get anymore letters from you this summer, but I leave for my trip soon, so I'll see you on September first. Please do me a favor though. The owl that delivered this letter is due back at the post office by noon of your birthday. Please see that he gets on his way in time. Thanks again, and enjoy your gift.

Love,

Hermione

The small wrapped gift she sent did look like a book, but when Harry unwrapped it, he found out how wrong he was. It was a miniature chess board, and the second Harry removed the last piece of wrapping paper, it automatically expanded to a more normal size. The board itself was made of blue and grey marble. There was a velvet lined case included with the board, and Harry found the chess pieces inside. They were the traditional black and white in color, and oddly enough, they didn't move or speak. Harry found out why when he read the small note taped to the bottom of the chessboard.

Harry,

I don't know about you, but I find wizard chess sets loud and obnoxious! This muggle set is much more relaxing without the pieces yelling at you, just like chess should be. I don't think I ever told you, but I was actually in the chess club at my primary school, and became quite good. Then wizard chess came along and turned me away from it. Maybe now we'll be able to play a few games together. Who knows? You may even beat Ron without his pieces helping him. Save me the first game!

Hermione

The gift was fun and entertaining, and yet still very practical and educational. 'How Hermione!' Harry thought. Because he couldn't

send her a thank you note, and the post owl was due back at whatever post office it came from, Harry quickly let the owl fly out the reopened window. It was a strong and young specimen, and didn't need the many resting hours like some other owls needed.

Speaking of Errol, Harry opened up the large parcel from the other Weasleys next. There were three separate packages inside. One from the twins, one from Ginny, and one from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Harry opened the latter first.

Like Ron had said, they had forwarded her special mince meat pies, along with some homemade fudge as well. The note was short and sweet, and Harry felt much love from the whole Weasley clan. Bill and Charlie didn't write separate notes, but told their parents to wish Harry happiness on his birthday. They also mentioned asking Dumbledore for permission to have Harry visit, and said they would write when he agreed.

Opening anything from Fred and George was always a gamble, as it had a fifty percent chance to blow up in your face. Luck was with him this time though, and Harry got through the next few minutes with all his hair intact. A note was accompanied by an assortment of candy, none of which Harry would be eating anytime soon. Their note read.... Dear ickle Harrykins,

Happy Birfday! Our boy's all grown up now, what are we to do? We thought about flying out to steal you away again, but we couldn't very well repeat that. Besides not having a car anymore, we'd have to dock ourselves points for unoriginality. Anyways, enjoy the sweets, and make sure our favorite cousin of yours doesn't get into any of them (Wink wink, nod nod!)

We've also got to tell you that the company is doing well. After leaving school last year we got a little impatient, and decided to open a shop in Diagon Alley. Needless to say, it was a bit more expensive than we thought, and we had to close down after a month. No worries though, we kept all the signs and decorations we made, and production levels are still climbing. We figure after a few months of mail order sales, we'll be ready to try Diagon Alley again. If only Hogwart's had a business class, we might have actually paid some

attention in school. There's a lesson for you Harry, pay attention in school. I suspect you'll be getting your OWL results soon, so keep at it. And whatever you do, don't ever throw one of the yellow taffies into a potion with boomslag skin. The results would be hazardous for a certain potions master. (Do we have to do the wink wink thing again?) But if by some chance something does go wrong, make sure the whole school knows that Yellow Yelling Yummies are only seven knuts a piece, and offered in our WWW catalogue. Later.

Gred and Forge

For his sake, Dudley should be thankful Harry and his sweets were no where near Privet Drive. Last time he had found only a single Ton Tongue Taffy, and pandemonium ensued. With an entire box of the Weezes, he wouldn't have stood a chance.

The last letter was from Ginny, and it didn't have an attached parcel. Opening the letter, Harry discovered why.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! I hope you've gotten a lot of nice things so far, at least from other people. I saw the poster Ron sent you, and on behalf of the Weasley family, I'm sorry for his horrific taste in gifts. We don't know what's wrong with him, but he insists you love the Cannons just as much as he does, and would love nothing better in the world to get their latest team poster. I hope Hermione has better taste than Ron, so you at least get something decent for your birthday.

I couldn't buy much either, but I remembered how you felt last summer, being left out of the loop. I hope Professor Dumbledore doesn't mind, but I paid for a one month's subscription to the Daily Prophet for you, so you can keep in touch with the news. I know the paper's not great lately, and tells more lies than truths, but at least you can read what everyone else does. You said Hedwig should be better by now, so she can pick up your paper every morning, or you can pay extra to have it delivered by owl. Sorry I couldn't afford that.

You'll be glad to know I've spent most of the summer practicing Quidditch. Whether you can play as seeker again or not, I've decided to try out for chaser now that there are openings on the team. Going up against Ron, I can now score six out of ten shots! I almost broke

out in a rendition of “Weasley is our King” I was so happy. We’re going back to HQ in a week, and Mum says we might see you there. I hope so. Bye!

Love,

Ginny

Harry was surprised at the thoughtful gift Ginny had gotten him. It was true that last summer he had felt more alone than ever, and had risked his uncle’s wrath just to listen to the muggle news. And even though he had had a subscription to the wizard paper the previous summer, Harry had never read past the front page headline. A lot of good that had done him! This summer, he promised himself he’d read more carefully. Even if they told a bunch of lies and half truths, Harry could keep his eye out for any suspicious attacks. From his dream Harry knew that Voldemort and his minions would be laying low for awhile, but they had to be doing something soon. And if anything happened, Harry could now find out.

He did wonder briefly how Hedwig could pick up his paper without being seen, but would worry about it later. He still had two more letters to read.

The school owl’s thick envelope had both his school letter and his OWL results inside. Excited about his scores, Harry read his OWL results first.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Enclosed are the results of your Ordinary Wizarding Level exams. We apologize for the delay in grading the tests, but several unprecedeted events forced us to reevaluate grading criteria. As it affects you, your Astronomy Owl has been curved one whole letter grade, to compensate for the unfortunate incident that occurred. The possible scores are as follows:

O Outstanding

E Exceeds Expectations

A Acceptable

P Poor

D Dreadful

T Terrible

A score of an O, E, or A is worth a total of one OWL. Scores of P, D, or T receive no credit. If you have any questions about your exams or scores, please feel free to write one of my assistants.

Sincerely,

Griselda Marchbanks

Wizarding Examinations Authority

OWL scores for Harry James Potter are as follows:

Astronomy – A

Care of Magical Creatures – O

Charms – E

Defense Against the Dark Arts – O plus

Divination – A

Herbology – E

History – D

Potions – O

Transfiguration – E

(A score of O plus marks a perfect score, which only occur on average every seventeen years. You earned one of two perfect marks this year. A perfect score of O plus is worth two OWLS.)

Total OWLs Nine

Nine OWLs; and a perfect score to boot! Why, that was essentially a score of one owl for every class he took! Harry couldn't believe he had done so well. The curved grade of an A in Astronomy made sense, and Harry had expected his scores of O's in CoMC and DADA, but he hadn't expected the one in Potions. He thought he could possibly get an E, and with McGonagall's help be able to take the advanced Potions class. Now Snape would have to take him on his own merit. Ha! If only he hadn't fallen asleep in History, he might have even gotten a passing grade in that class too.

Harry wondered how many OWLs Ron and Hermione had gotten as well. Ron wasn't as good of a student, but had to have at least scored well on DADA. And Hermione had probably set some new records; including that other perfect score. If he could get nine OWLs himself, she must have done so much better! Maybe even more than the traditional twelve possible, like Percy had done.

Harry folded the letter back up, and read the other one from Hogwarts. It was the standard letter naming the texts and supplies he would need, but there was an added note from McGonagall.

Dear Mr. Potter,

It pleases me to see you score so well on your OWLs. I must say, I was very shocked to see such remarkable scores, and many of the staff feel the same way. Congratulations of dedicating yourself to the career path of an auror; you're well on you way. Please send back a reply with the school owl on which NEWT preparatory classes you wish to enroll in. You qualify for all classes except History. Ten is the maximum number of NEWT classes you can take, but as you only qualify for eight that won't be a problem. If you would like to try Muggle Studies as an elective, I might be able to place you in the class if you pass an equivalency exam; as you've grown up in a muggle household.

On another matter, I'm pleased to inform you that your lifetime Quidditch ban has been lifted, as well as those other ridiculous rules. I have your broom safely locked in my office, and will return it back to

you at start of term. I look forward to your performances this year, as I've become fond of housing the Quidditch Cup in my office.

Professor Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
The good news kept on coming. Not only did he score well on his OWLs, but he could play Quidditch again! Harry was so far having one hell of a birthday.

The last letter was from Dumbledore, and it was one Harry was not looking forward to. The headmaster had never sent Harry anything for his birthday before, so it had to be something else. During his visit Remus had mentioned that Dumbledore was going to give Harry a little space, but he knew it wouldn't last.

"Well," he said out loud, "I may as well see what the old man wants."

The thick envelope contained a long letter written on almost three pieces of parchment. But that's not what caused it to be thick. A metal badge was the cause, and it fell onto Harry's lap as he ripped open the letter. It was a prefect badge. Harry thought, 'Great, now he's trying to buy me off.'

Dear Harry,

I hope everything finds you well on your birthday. The age of sixteen is a very important milestone for a young man. I remember my own sixteenth birthday as if it was only yesterday, but I digress. I have a few things to discuss with you, and thought it best to present them to you as early as possible, so they won't come as a surprise in September.

The first issue is to offer my congratulations, for you've been named a Gryffindor prefect. As I mentioned last year, you were already entitled to it, and I've decided to correct my past mistake. Even with the extra burden which I had previously feared, I have no doubt you will be a most effective role model for others. Unfortunately Mr. Weasley is unable to continue in his capacity as prefect, so you will be taking his place.

I would also like to ask if you plan on continuing with the defense classes you set up last year. I believe you called it the D.A.? As you no doubt know from Professor McGonagall's letter, your lifetime Quidditch ban, as well as the other "Education Decrees" have all been revoked. As such, I'd be pleased if you would continue the lessons, and perhaps even expand them. I was thinking that you could offer two levels of study; one for beginners and one for more advanced students. In these perilous times, our students need all the extra help they can get. If you agree, you may still direct the meetings as you see fit, and may even award and subtract house points, within reason of course. Whether you or another student decides to head the new defense club, I've asked a former professor to oversee the lessons; strictly in an advisory role. I do believe you remember Professor Lupin? As his affliction makes it difficult to attend a full month's worth of classes, this type of loose appointment much better suits him than tenure as a fulltime professor. It would also allow Remus to be near Hogwarts, where he will be doing some extra work for me and the Order.

I'm afraid you will not want to hear this next bit of news, but it must be said. You must continue with your Occlumency lessons come fall. I know a tension exists between you and Professor Snape, but you must put that aside to learn to block Voldemort out of your mind. I've talked to Professor Snape, and he's agreed to make a clean start with you, and to hold no grudges over what might have happened in last year's lessons. As we can no longer use the excuse of remedial potion lessons because of your impressive OWL scores, another excuse will be implemented. I haven't yet decided what, but I do have a few ideas in mind. It's important now more than ever for you to learn this, so we'll be increasing your lessons to twice a week. The information I told you about the prophecy must not fall into the wrong hands. I still keep the secret, but I encourage you to share the information with those you trust.

You'll also be glad to know that Molly Weasley has been quite persistent in writing me about letting you visit, and I've finally agreed. A month has passed, which renews the blood bond between you and your relatives, so you can now leave home. In five days a team will arrive to escort you back to HQ, and you will remain there for the rest of the summer. I understand you already have many of your school

things, so we'll send for the rest of your supplies. Please be ready by 11:00 pm, and have all your belongings packed.

On a personal note, I have tried my best to respect your wishes Harry. Your last letter was most surprising, and I must admit that I had hoped you would have seen past an old man's mistakes. I will be very busy the rest of the summer, as I still haven't found a DADA professor, but if you would like to set some time aside to talk, please let me know. Unlike last year, with some necessary precautions, I will make the time to see you.

Yours truly,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The next couple of days flew by for Harry. After opening all his gifts and reading his letter, he finally fell back asleep. He managed a few hours rest before the sun woke him again, and immediately replied to all his friends. He didn't mention specifics, but he let Remus, Hagrid, and the Weasleys know that Voldemort would be trying to intercept owls, and therefore he couldn't write again, nor should they. He did send Neville the career book he had bought him, and hoped the boy would like it.

Harry wrote back to Professor McGonagall, and thanked her for informing him about his Quidditch ban being lifted. He also signed up for his class load, but didn't choose anywhere near the nine classes he was offered. The only NEWT prep classes he signed up for were Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, DADA, and Arithmancy. He didn't even know if he could get into that last one, but assured McGonagall he had been studying, and that by the end of the summer he should be at a sixth year level. Harry knew that five classes wasn't considered a lot, but he informed his head of house that with Quidditch practice, D.A. meetings, Occlumency lessons, and prefect duties back in his schedule, he'd be very busy. He had no intention of taking the extra lessons with Snape, but didn't think it would help to mention that.

All his response letters and thanks yours were normal, except for the one to Dumbledore. Harry's note was just as blunt and to the point as the old wizard's had been.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I accept the position of prefect, but only because Ron has given it up. But if this is an attempt to buy my forgiveness, please know that it didn't work. I'm only accepting the role because I think I can do a good job, and I think I've deserved it. Regardless of my feelings towards you, I promise to do the best job I can as Gryffindor prefect. I also agree to continue with the D.A. Honestly I was going to keep up with it anyway, but I'm glad I can with school authorization. Having Remus around will be very helpful too. I think appointing him advisor is a great idea.

That was the only part of this letter I think you'll like, but turn about is only fair play. You wrote me that a team will be coming to retrieve me in five days, where I'll be spending the rest of the summer at HQ. Well, you might as well tell the team to stand down, because that won't be happening. I've left Privet Drive, and don't plan on ever going back. Even if I were at "home," what makes you think I would ever want to go back to HQ again? It's the last place I want to be, and I don't appreciate you ordering me there.

All you have to know is that I'm fine, and that I've taken precautions so that no one can find me. In truth, I'm having the best summer ever, and for the first time I'm not counting down the days till school begins. I warn you now, I don't want to be punished for going missing when I see you next. I never asked to be looked after, and I'm even telling you now not to waste your time looking for me. I doubt you go through so much trouble for any other student. It's nice that you care, but you're not my guardian. Sirius was, and now he's gone. As I see it, next in line for guardianship are the Dursleys, and they could care less about me. So I'm looking after myself, and I promise that I'll be aboard the Hogwarts Express September first.

I had a vision of Voldemort last night, and I'll summarize it quickly for you. He met with Malfoy, Nott, Avery, and Macnair, and punished them for not answering his summons earlier. They said they were trying to avoid detection, and that you had people watching their actions until

the Death Eater trials were over. Lucius recounted the events of the DoM to him, and told him how the existence of the prophecy came as a surprise to me. Voldemort ordered the Death Eaters to stake out Privet Drive, Hermione's house, and the Burrow, to try and intercept letters and gain intel. He wants to know who the other student with me was (he knows about Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny), and he wants to know if you told me about the prophecy. By the way, Draco is helping his father, and Voldemort even made a comment about how he's been helpful in the past. Voldemort's assuming and hoping that I don't know what the prophecy says, and I say let him believe that. He doesn't want to make any public move until he either knows what the prophecy says, or is sure that I don't know. I appreciate you keeping quite about it, and would like for you to remain so. I don't know if I'll tell anyone yet, but I'm thinking about it.

I've told all my friends that they can't write any more letters this summer because of Voldemort, but they don't know I've left Privet Drive. Feel free to tell them whatever you want, but you'll be the one having to explain. I know I wouldn't want to face the Weasley temper if they were told I went missing. I suggest you tell them I didn't want to spend any time at HQ, and leave it at that.

As you can guess, I've been more active this summer than I lead you to believe. I guess I should feel sorry that I've had to deceive you, but I'm not. If I was honest, I never would have had the chance to do half the things I wanted. I'm tired of having my life dictated, and so far this summer has produced nothing but good things for me. If I have anymore visions I'll be in contact, otherwise see you at school.

Harry Potter

Once Harry had sent out all of his replies, the first thing he did was cast a magical anti-detection ward. The Fidelius Charm would take care of most of his problems, but Harry remembered that owls could still find their way to Grimmauld Place. He didn't want to risk someone following an owl to find him, so had to cast a ward to prevent it. The anti-detection ward muffled a person's magical signature, so owls and location spells wouldn't be able to pick him up on radar. Harry had also originally planned on casting anti-apparition wards, but those weren't needed with the Fidelius Charm. As long as he didn't tell anyone about his location, no one could appear in his

new home. Besides, the anti-apparition ward was one of the most difficult spells he'd ever seen. Currently, Harry wasn't able to perform it.

Harry then made his way into muggle London to purchase new furnishings. He bought a big screen TV, a high tech video system, a top of the line stereo, speakers and wiring, some clocks and timepieces, and a few other things as well. Electronic equipment couldn't be conjured or transfigured, so it was among the few things that Harry had to pay for. The rest of the morning he spent conjuring toothpicks, pieces of metal, and scraps of leather, and them transfiguring them into furniture.

Harry left his afternoons open for exercise and offensive training. Even though he was having fun decorating his new place, he didn't want to fall behind the schedule he had set for himself. Harry did end up getting a whole new set of exercise equipment, so he could leave the other in his school trunk.

By the end of the week, Harry had completely furnished his new home. The strips of dark brown leather he had conjured eventually became comfortable couches and armchairs, and they also made fine dividers between the areas of his great room. Harry used the same type of leather throughout the whole house, as well as wrought iron and a light colored maple wood for all the tables, chairs, and cabinets. The three materials tied the house together, and Harry was glad he took the time to pick up a few decorating brochures at a muggle furniture store.

The master suite ended up being the same style as in his trunk, just with different colors. Harry loved Gryffindor and all, but sometimes did get a little sick of the constant red and gold. Instead he decorated his bedroom in navy and cream, as well as most of the great room. With the exception of the two long tiled hallways, the house was covered with hardwood floors. So Harry conjured a variety of large plush rugs, most of which carried the navy/cream theme throughout. He did add a small fireplace to the master suite, but only for atmosphere and warmth. It wasn't large enough to flop from, but could be used to firetalk.

The six guestrooms Harry each crafted in a different style. One room was red, another green, and he even made one orange, in case Ron ever visited. The furniture was all made out of the same type of woods and metals, but each also had its own unique style. Some contained four poster beds, one had matching twin beds, and another had a rotating round mattress. The only type of bed Harry left out was a sleigh bed, as that was his. No matter how easy it would be, he wanted to leave the master suite nicer than the others.

The linens, rugs, and bath towels for the bathrooms matched the colors of their respective bedrooms. The six guest bedrooms and baths all had the same layout, so decorating them all was easier than Harry thought.

The Dueling chamber was set up exactly as he wanted it, with the exception of the missing practice dummies. On his next trip into Diagon Alley Harry decided to look into getting more, but for now he brought three of them from his trunk into the room.

The pool table Harry wanted proved to be a great challenge for his transfiguration skills, but he got it done eventually. Again, he had to go out into muggle London to get accurate measurements for the table and cue sticks, but the finished result was a work of art. Harry also finished his muggle room with a dart board, ping pong table, and wet bar. The bar contained no alcohol, but Harry though he might be able to convince Tom to sell him kegs of butterbeer instead of the numerous bottles. Harry had been having at least one butterbeer a day, and found he still hadn't gotten tired of it. It surprised him when the cases he had bought never ran out of bottles, but Harry supposed it had something to do with magic.

Harry left the separate flat just as it was. He did add a coat of paint to the walls, but that was the only change it needed. He didn't want to bother with furnishing it just yet, as he didn't know if he would even use it, or just change it into something else.

The grand accomplishment for Harry, and a great surprise for Dobby and Winky, was the secret room off the kitchen's eating area he had told them not to enter. For an hour each day, for the whole week, Harry had slipped into the room to work on his masterpiece.

On the day he had finally allowed the elves to enter, both of them tackled Harry around the knees and cried in joy. The room was a miniature version of the master suite, with all the furniture resized for house-elves. Harry didn't know how close Dobby and Winky had become, but decided to leave the single bed. He figured if they wanted to change it, they had the ability.

But even though it was the same set up as the master suite, it looked much different. That's because where Harry decided to decorate his room in navy and cream, he used every color of the rainbow for Dobby and Winky's room. The walls were one big continuous mural of color, charmed to move like a wizard painting. And the large mural had only one subject; socks.

For an hour each day, for the entire week, Harry had reached the limits of his imagination in creating every type of sock pattern he could think of. The walls, the bed sheets, the bathroom towels; everything was covered in socks, and not one of them matched.

Harry at first was worried that while Dobby would love the room, Winky might be upset at having clothing being the room's centerpiece, but his fears were in vain.

"Mr. Harry Potter sir, this is being too much! Winky is good house-elf, and good elves sleep in laundry." Once Winky had stopped crying, she became quite articulate.

"Nonsense Winky," he replied, "you and Dobby live hear too, and you should have your own room. With all the extra space I have, it only makes sense. And I won't have any of my friends sleeping in piles of dirty sheets."

"Friends!" Dobby was one happy elf. "Great wizard Mr. Harry Potter sir called Winky and Dobby friends! Oh how happy Dobby is! See Winky, free elves is not bad!"

This brought up another subject Harry wanted to discuss. Once he was able, he led the two elves back out the bedroom door that led to

the kitchen, and sat them down at the small round table. It was time for a serious discussion.

"Now Winky, speaking of free elves, we need to discuss your situation. When Dobby originally came to visit me, we made some arrangements. We settled on a rate of pay of five galleons a month for him, with time off each week to be decided later. Since you weren't around then, we didn't know what you would want. And now that you're not living in the trunk anymore, it's time to talk. Are you still opposed to taking clothes? I won't force you to if you don't want to, but I would like you to wear something nice."

Winky looked extremely nervous. Perched in the oversized chair, only her head showed over the table's surface, and she was biting her tiny nails. "But Winky's good house-elf. Good elves no wear clothes!" She was barely making a sound, but Harry knew she thought she was being punished.

"You are a good house-elf Winky, otherwise I wouldn't have wanted you to work for me. But I believe in you having your freedom, just like Dobby has. I'm not angry with you, I'm trying to reward you. The summer's just half over, and already the two of you have done so much."

Winky listened carefully to Harry. He could see she wanted to say yes, but hundreds of years of oppression had conditioned her not to. Harry waited patiently as she wrung her hands, and had a short private conversation with Dobby in hushed tones. Finally she seemed to reach a decision, and turned to face Harry.

"If Mr. Harry Potter wishes, Winky will wear clothes!" The look on her face was priceless. It was the same expression wizards showed when they heard Voldemort's name. "But Winky does not want wages. Winky is good house-elf, and good elves no get pay."

Harry had expected this, and quickly agreed. He was actually surprised he convinced her so quickly to wear proper clothing. Up until now, she had still been wearing the same ratty dress he had last seen her in. It wasn't as dirty as it had once been, in her drunk on butterbeer days, but it still looked like a rag.

“Very good Winky. The last thing I need to talk about is your time off. I already agreed to give Dobby some, and I don’t want to leave him lonely, so you get the same time off.”

Dobby looked amazed, and Winky looked confused. Harry didn’t think she knew what time off was. So he explained.

“Every night after eight o’clock, and the whole day on Sunday, you are free to do whatever you want, as long as it doesn’t involve serving me. No cooking meals, no doing laundry, and no cleaning the house. Occasionally I may ask you to work at these times, but I’ll make sure to grant you more time off on another day to make up for it. Sunday I’ll make my own meals, and if you two are around, you’re welcome to join me. The rest of the time, you can do whatever you want.” It was sad to think that Harry still knew very little about his two small friends. He didn’t know what they would do with their free time, so he made a few suggestions.

“I know in the past Dobby has made some of his own clothes. You can do things like that. Maybe you have family you want to visit? Or some friends back at Hogwarts you want to see? During your free time, you can go and see them if you want. If I’m around, we can play games together in the muggle room, or you can read books from the library.

“You can even explore muggle London if you want, but you must be careful not to be seen. There’s nothing you can’t do, as long as you keep safe and don’t tell anyone about where I live, or that you work for me.”

Dobby and Winky looked horrified. Telling about a master’s secrets was the worst offense a house-elf could make.

“Don’t worry,” Harry assured them, “I know you won’t tell anyone about me. I’m just being cautious. I met a house-elf named Kreacher once, and he told lies about his master, and disobeyed him. I don’t think the two of you would ever do that, I just want you to be careful.”

Both the house-elves looked floored. Harry didn't know how Dobby had spent his free time in the past, but he doubted he was granted this much freedom at Hogwarts. He knew both elves would want to argue against so much free time, so before they could say another word, Harry stood up from the table and retired for the night to his room. It was a Monday night, exactly one week from his birthday, and he would be back to his normal training schedule now that his home was completely finished.

That is, if he managed to get enough sleep after he woke up screaming from yet another vision about Voldemort.

AUTHOR NOTES:

This was a quick update, because I'm really writing a lot lately. I know that readers really want to get into the body of the story, so I've been inspired to write. I know I used more painful detail to explain the Fidelus Charm and the design of Harry's new home, but I like details. And it seems that others do to, so Thank You to those that think my story isn't "dragging". I even have a drawing of Harry's floorplan, which is displayed in the "files" section of my Yahoo! Group. A few readers have done their own interpretations, so please log on to take a look. I'm glad that most people understood the time traveling bit, even if it was only a basic understanding. Like I said, it's not overly important to the story, but I tried my best to explain it. It's tough though; when I reread the chapter it makes perfect sense to me, but that's because I've spent weeks planning it out in my head. Chapter 10 should come out fairly soon as well, and for the first time we'll see Harry in action using all his new skills. Also, tune in to see the reactions to Harry's many letters. I'm having much fun writing the Order meeting. Later.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 10 – First Blood, Part II

“WHAT!!!”

The whole room cringed at the volume of Molly Weasley’s voice. All had experienced some form of the Weasley temper in the past, but none had seen her so worried since her daughter had been kidnapped many years ago. “What do you mean he’s gone missing? Where could he go?”

Dumbledore had expected this response, yet it didn’t make hearing it any easier. It was now almost a week after he had received Harry’s response, and he had just finished telling the entire Order of the Phoenix that Harry had left Privet Drive.

“Molly, if you would just calm down, I’ll explain fully. For the time being, we have no reason to believe that Harry’s in danger, or that Voldemort knows he’s gone missing. The quicker we can find Harry, the safer he’ll be. So please, calm down and let’s get through this.” Dumbledore only half believed his words. He had very little hopes of finding Harry after a week of intensive searching. No owls had been able to locate him, nor Fawkes his phoenix. Although phoenixes didn’t have post owls’ gift of magically locating people no matter where they were, Dumbledore had hoped Harry’s unique bond with the bird would prove useful. It had not.

It took another few minutes for Arthur to calm his wife enough to retake her seat, and listen to Dumbledore’s explanation.

“Like I said, in Harry’s response letter he mentioned that he left Privet Drive, and has no intentions of returning. He also admitted to intentionally deceiving us, and in retrospect it looks like young Harry was up to more than just tending to his injured owl during his trip to Diagon Alley. I wonder if Hedwig was even injured in the first place. I must admit that we never visited Eeylop’s Owl Emporium to verify that part of Harry’s story, we only visited the Leaky Cauldron and Flourish & Blotts.

“Since I didn’t want to prematurely alarm anyone, and the fact that Harry has gone missing must not reach the ears of any Death Eaters,

I only told a few select people about Harry's departure. Remus, Alastor, Kingsley, and myself have all been conducting thorough searches since then, and have as yet not turned up any results. No one in Diagon Alley has seen Harry or someone matching his description, and his muggle relatives have no idea where he went, or even when he left."

Madame Amelia Bones decided to interrupt the wizened wizard at this point. "Albus, what do you mean his relatives don't know when he left? How could they not?"

Molly Weasley scoffed at the question, and had a look on her face that almost matched the sneer Snape had perfected over the many years.

"Amelia," Dumbledore explained, "since you're not personally familiar with Harry, and it's a well hidden fact, you must realize that Harry's aunt and uncle don't appreciate him as they should. In fact, in past years I've learned that their treatment of Harry almost borders abuse. They've never struck him as far as I know, but they hold no love for him either. From what I've been told, in the summer months Harry is usually required to do the majority of household chores, and is rationed very little food to eat. While his cousin is lavished with toys and gifts, Harry only recently earned the right to sleep in a bed. The nine years before the arrival of his Hogwart's letter, he was forced to sleep on a cot in the small compartment under the stairs. The fact that the Dursleys don't care what has happened to Harry is the only thing about this whole affair that doesn't surprise me."

The whole room silenced at hearing Dumbledore's explanation. Only the Weasleys, Remus, Hagrid, and McGonagall knew the extent of Harry's treatment at home. The rest were surprised to learn that the Boy-Who-Lived was treated so badly. Even Snape, who prided himself in his teasing Harry about being "spoiled and arrogant" look surprised, and even mildly ashamed.

"But if that's so, and you knew about it, why is Harry still staying at that place? Surely someone else is willing to look after him during his summers?" Madame Bones asked the question so many others had

in the past, one that Dumbledore found harder to justify each time he answered.

“Because Amelia, even though Harry isn’t shown much love at home, for reasons I’ll not get into it remains the safest place for him to be, with the possible exception of Hogwarts. If the Dursleys ever do come to abuse him, I will be first in line to remove him from their home. But as long as Harry’s basic needs are met, the protections in place make it virtually impossible for Voldemort or his men to find or hurt Harry.”

Madame Bones would have argued further, but she was interrupted mid-sentence by Snape who had had enough. He just wanted to get to the point of the meeting.

“Headmaster, what have you found out about Potter? It’s been almost a full week. Surely there must be some leads we could follow?”

Dumbledore turned to face his potions master. “Not as many as you would think, Severus. I myself don’t know how it was accomplished, but Harry seems to have disappeared without a trace. Remus headed the investigation; I’ll let him tell all we know. Remus?”

Remus Lupin stood from the corner he was sitting in. The past few weeks had been good for him, and he had retreated from the cave of despair he’d been in following Sirius’s death. The correspondence he shared with Harry had helped immensely, and the memories of the single personal visit had helped him through his last monthly transformation. Although Snape’s Wolfsbane potion continued to work, without Padfoot around his time spent during the full moon was very depressing.

“Thank you Headmaster. We, that is myself, Alastor, and Kingsley, first noticed a change in Harry’s schedule the day of his birthday. Up until then, each afternoon he left his house for a run, which would usually last about an hour. The day of his birthday however, he never left the house. We didn’t think it unusual, and thought he merely took the day off to open his gifts. Later that afternoon Albus informed us of Harry’s departure, and I went in to investigate.

Remus paused and tried to keep his face void of emotions. "I had long heard about the Dursleys of course, both from Harry himself and some of the others who have had contact with them. I myself even met them briefly at the train station this past year. I can honestly say any reports about them not liking our kind are grossly underrated. The second Petunia Dursley opened the front door and saw me, she slammed it in my face, yelling and screaming for her husband. When Vernon opened the front door, he demanded to know what I wanted, and what right did I have to show myself on his front lawn wearing, and I quote, 'those freaky clothes.' And I don't think he was referring to their slightly worn look either." Remus said this last part with a bit of a chuckle.

"I explained as civilly as I could that I came to inquire about Harry, and was informed that Harry hadn't been seen by them in weeks. When I insisted on seeing him, the man rushed me into the house, and escorted me upstairs. I was directed into a small bedroom, where besides the most uncomfortable bed I've ever laid eyes on and a few pieces of rickety furniture, the room showed no sign of habitation. When I questioned Dursley about it, he said that he and Harry had come to an agreement, and that they were to totally ignore each other the entire summer. It seems that Harry wasn't doing his normal summer chores either, and that he wasn't even eating with them. In fact, I still have no idea how Harry managed to eat at all this summer. The only times he did leave his room, to run each afternoon, was when the Dursleys were all out of the house.

"After performing a few spells, I came to the conclusion that there were no traces of portkey use or apparition, the house fireplace hadn't been connected to the floo network, and there was no detection of dark magic being used. It looks like Harry just vanished. A wide canvas of the area showed no further clues, and the Knight Bus had not picked up any passengers nearby during the timeframe. Since then myself, Alastor, Kingsley, and Dumbledore have each searched different areas, and each investigated personal hunches, but have found no further trace. His friends haven't heard from him either. They last heard from him in response to his birthday gifts, and were told not to try to contact him again. He mentioned that the owls might be intercepted, and they didn't find anything suspicious about

that. None of them know Harry's missing, and I'd hate to be the one to tell them."

Dumbledore stood back up as Remus finished. "Thank you Remus; very thorough. So everyone, that's where we stand now. It's been a week, and the four of us haven't found one clue, so I thought it time to include the rest of the Order in this crisis. I was reluctant to at first, as Harry point blank told me not to waste my time or resources to look for him. He even warned me against scolding him in the fall for running off. But I thought I'd ask the opinion of the rest of you. What should we do now?"

Most in the room were speechless. It wasn't too often that Dumbledore, as head of the Order of the Phoenix, asked what the group's course of action should be. Those that knew him well, like Snape and McGonagall, became immediately worried that Dumbledore had already run out of options. Others who thought that Dumbledore was merely asking for advice, had a few questions to clear up so issues.

Diggle spoke up, in his normal excited tone. He had always been a big fan of Harry's, and thought the young wizard could do no wrong. "Albus, what do you mean Harry warned you not to scold him in the fall? Doesn't he know how much danger he's in?"

Dumbledore gave a grim smile, which he had gotten to know well that past week. "What I mean Dedalus, is that Harry kindly reminded me that the only authority I have over him is as Hogwart's Headmaster. As I'm not his guardian, and with the passing of Sirius the Dursleys are, I have no right to interfere in his life. And as the Dursleys are quite happy with Harry being gone from their home, they have no wish no look for him. Harry was just pointing out that he will not be punished for disobeying my wishes, when I have no legal say in this matter. I only hope that the precautions Harry took will last the summer. We certainly can't find him, so I only assume that Voldemort can't either."

Emmiline Vance spoke up next. "Did he contact anyone else that might know what he's up to? What about Remus, or his friends? Someone must have a hint of what's going on?"

"As I said already," Remus answered, "I have no idea how this happened. I met with Harry days before, and I got no hint of deception or him planning to do anything rash. Which leads me to believe that he'd been planning this for some time. I spoke to all of his friends, and none of them suspect anything."

"I noticed something peculiar." McGonagall broke the silence that followed. "At first I thought it was nothing, but now I see it could mean something. I'm not sure. In registering for his classes, Mr. Potter only chose to enlist in five classes, one which he doesn't meet the requirements for. I thought it strange for him to continue with so few courses, especially considering he had one of the top OWL results of his year. But he mentioned that with Quidditch practice, the D.A., his extra curricular classes (she gave a brief look to Snape), and prefect duties, he thought it best to have a light course load."

"What's the D.A.?" Someone asked.

"Ah," Dumbledore gave a genuine smile this time, "the D.A. refers to a group of students Harry started last year to practice defensive spells. With the lack of proper lessons, they formed a club that broke the High Inquisitor's new rules. I daresay many of the fifth and seventh year students owe their outstanding OWL and NEWT DADA scores to Harry and his friends. I've asked him to continue with the group this year, and to even expand upon it. He's agreed, and that was the one bit of good news his last letter contained."

"What exactly did that letter say? You read the last one to us." Snape was curt as always.

"I'm sorry Severus, but this time the letter is of a more personal nature, and contains some information I'm not willing to share. I have told you everything pertinent however."

"What did Minerva mean about Harry's prefect duties? Since when is he a prefect?" Molly Weasley asked; a question Dumbledore wasn't prepared for.

He simply stared at her. "You mean you don't know?"

“Know what?”

“Molly, Arthur,” he started, “I’m sorry to have to tell you, but Ron’s been dismissed as Gryffindor’s sixth year prefect. It was in his Hogwart’s letter, he should have told you by now.”

“WHAT? He never said a thing! I know he didn’t score too well on his OWLs, but five is a fair number, it’s even more than the twins got when....”

“Molly,” this time it was McGonagall who spoke, “it’s more than just his low OWL scores. More than one prefect has complained that Ron has been neglecting his duties. He totally avoids confrontation in his own house, and only reprimanded other students, mostly those in Slytherin. Several times in fact, when Hermione had to punish Gryffindors, and looked to Ron for support, he refused to take a side. In all fairness, I think it might have to do with some of the teasing he took from his brothers. Still, that doesn’t excuse the fact. As you know we don’t appoint prefects only to enforce school rules, but also to provide role models to their fellow students. Ron simply hasn’t been meeting those standards, and it was my decision to remove his prefect status. I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

Molly was fuming now. “Not as sorry as Ron will be when we talk next!” Arthur winced at the tone of voice his wife was using. He knew when to stay away, and he also knew his youngest son was in for a world of hurt in the near future.

“Well, I hope that answers your question Molly, but I’m afraid we have to return to the issue of Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore wanted to avoid anymore sidetracks as time was precious. “The question is what do we do now that he is....”

Just then Fred and George barged in the door. Even though they weren’t in school any longer, they still hadn’t been inducted as Order of the Phoenix members yet. As such, while they were let in on some secrets (like the fact that Harry was missing), they had to remain in the kitchen during formal meetings. It came as a big surprise when they announced their reason for interrupting the meeting.

"Mom, Dumbledore!" The twins almost spoke as one. Fred, or maybe it was George, continued as the other caught his breath. "Harry; his head's in the fireplace! He's okay!"

A loud murmur went through the room, and more than one person got up and started for the door.

"Wait!" The other twin yelled. "He only wants to speak to Remus. He says if he sees anyone else in the kitchen, he'll leave. He sounds serious."

Remus turned to Dumbledore. He was dying to talk to Harry and find out what was going on, but wanted to hear what Dumbledore had to say first. Harry would surely wait a few moments. Remus raised his eyebrows and simply said, "Well?"

Dumbledore didn't hesitate. "Well play it safe for now. Remus, go see what he wants, and try to find out anything you can. If possible, convince him to tell us his location. When you're done, come back immediately. Understand?"

Remus nodded and ran through the door. The twins tried to slip a few extendable ears under the kitchen door after him, but he cast a charm to prevent it. When he turned towards the hearth, Harry face was grinning at him.

"Hey Remus, what's up?"

"Harry! Do you have any idea how worried we've been about you? Molly Weasley's almost had daily heart attacks just at the mention of your name, which has been a very popular topic let me tell you. Where are you?"

Harry just smiled. "Sorry to scare everyone, but as I wrote Dumbledore, I had a few things to do, and couldn't with you lot breathing down my neck. I'm fine, but don't have a lot of time. If you want to know more, meet me at the park from two weeks ago in half an hour. Bring your wand, and come alone." Harry's tone dropped to dead serious at that last part.

Remus wasn't satisfied with that response. "Harry, where have you been? I tried to...."

"A half hour Remus, by the swing set, and come alone. If you don't, no one will see me till September. Bye." And with that, Harry's head disappeared.

After reentering the parlor, and shooing the Weasley twins back into the kitchen, Remus quickly updated the Order on his short conversation.

"Albus, please say I can go alone! I need to know that Harry's safe." Remus decided he would go even if Dumbledore didn't agree. It was then 5:20 in the afternoon. The Order had had a rare afternoon meeting because some members had business to take care of later that night. He'd have to meet Harry at 5:45 regardless of the Order's decision. Luckily Dumbledore said yes. What he didn't tell Remus was that he wouldn't be going alone. Dumbledore hated to do it, but one way or another, Harry was coming back to Order HQ that night! It was 5:30, and Harry was already in the small park, under his invisibility cloak, waiting for Remus. He had apparated to the park immediately after his fire-call, as he wanted to be there early in case the Order tried anything funny. He trusted Remus enough to show up alone, but not Dumbledore. They still didn't know that Harry could apparate, or that he held a portkey in his hands, so Harry was confident that if something went wrong, he could escape before they had a chance to get to him.

As he waited for Remus, Harry reflected back on the past day, and all that had happened since his second vision of Voldemort that summer. It too had been uncomfortably vivid, but Harry thought himself lucky as he now knew what Voldemort was up too.

The vision had been of another meeting with the same Death Eaters. They had finally learned that Harry had gone missing, and reported that no owls had been sent or received by his friends. Lucius, who had been watching Hermione's house, told his master that the family had left town, and Voldemort wanted Wormtail to go in and

investigate. He was to take five others as back up, but would break into the house alone, and look through Hermione's things. Voldemort hoped that among her letters and possessions, she had left a clue to Harry's whereabouts. None of the Death Eaters knew that his friends were just as clueless as they were.

The rest of the day Harry spent planning out and preparing for the following night, when Wormtail would make the trip. He felt confident about taking on the weak wizard himself, but was cautious about the five others as back up. He did have the element of surprise, but didn't want to risk anything as it was his first real encounter with Death Eaters since he started to train. Harry briefly thought about asking Ron and some of the other D.A. students to help, but knew they weren't up to the task. None of them had trained the summer, and Harry's didn't want to risk them. The only other person he even considered asking to help was Remus. Even if he was in Dumbledore's camp, Harry knew he had a personal score to settle with Pettigrew, and would jump at the chance.

And so it came that Harry used his new fireplace for the first time, and called HQ for Remus, not knowing he was interrupting a meeting. The floo had been connected for a few days now, but thanks to the all-powerful Fidelius Charm, couldn't be accessed by anyone who didn't know its location. For those who did know (only Harry and the elves right now), his home was designated as Harry's Hideaway.

Harry wasn't shocked at Remus's surprised reaction at hearing from him. The past few nights had provided for interesting dreams of different Order member's reactions to his disappearance. It was while he reminisced that Remus apparated to the swing set, almost two minutes early. Still under cover of his cloak, Harry crept up to Remus slowly, taking extra precaution not to make a sound that his heightened werewolf senses might pick up. His eyes scanned the rest of the park; his magical lens fully in use now. Harry had caught on quick to the x-ray function, but hadn't much opportunity to use it with only himself alone in his flat. Harry didn't even consider using his magical lens to pry into the house-elves private lives. That was just too weird.

Harry found out he wasn't being paranoid after all. A few seconds after Remus sat on the highest swing to wait for Harry, he spotted three figures thirty meters off, hidden under invisibility cloaks. Moody's magical eye hadn't spotted him yet, and Tonks and Snape so far posed no threat. The three spread out to begin their search.

However, just Moody's presence was a worry, and Harry quit the commando routine and broke out in a full sprint for Remus. He was only a few feet away, but a stunning spell could travel a few feet very fast.

Remus had just a couple seconds to notice a body appear out of thin air, as Harry ripped off his invisibility cloak, and tucked it into his jacket. He started to speak, but Harry cut him off. The others had also taken notice of him now, and were about to intervene.

"Not now, and hold on!" Harry had taken Remus's arm, and pressed the hair comb he had brought with him into his hand, while still keeping a firm grip on it himself.

With a devilish smile Harry turned to Snape, who was the closest, just as he began to raise his wand. The surprise Snape showed at Harry's ability to see him through the cloak provided the extra time needed for him to escape.

"So long sucker! Activate!"

The key word activated the comb portkey, and with the familiar tug behind their navels, Harry and Remus disappeared from the small park, leaving three very surprised and concerned wizards behind.

Miles away, Harry and Remus crashed to the ground behind a tool shed, in a fairly large back yard. Harry still hadn't gotten the hang of arriving by Portkey, and Remus had been unprepared. It took them both a moment to gather themselves and take in their new surrounding.

"Harry, where in the bloody hell are we? And how'd you get a portkey?" Remus had a million other questions, but wanted to start with the most obvious.

"Not now Remus, we've got to get off this street. Follow me, and I'll answer your questions later." Harry left no room for argument because he took off for the front yard of the house, and began down the street. The scenery was familiar to Remus, but he couldn't place it yet.

Some of his questions were answered after a four block walk, when the two turned up the long winding driveway of a familiar house.

"Harry, why are we at Hermione's house? They're gone; no one's home."

Harry only turned around and raised his finger to his lips, motioning Remus to be quiet. At the end of the driveway, Harry turned not towards the front door, but for a side entrance, near the garage. He surprised Remus once more when he whipped out his wand and used an unlocking spell to open the door. Remus started to splutter, but Harry guided him in the door before he could speak. The two made their way inside, and Remus plunked down in a kitchen chair, trying to gather his thoughts.

"Are you mad? First you go running off without any protection! Then you pull some crazy cloak and dagger stunt and whisk us away from the meeting you set up; with a portkey no less! And now you're using magic out of school. Fudge is sure to expel you this time! And with the way you've been treating Dumbledore, I'd not be surprised if he let you this time!"

Harry laughed. Apparently Remus hadn't noticed the extreme lack of owls delivering expulsion papers. "Remus, relax. As I said in my letters, I'm perfectly safe where I've been staying. I used a portkey back at the park because Moody, Snape, and Tonks were all there under invisibility cloaks, and I had warned you to show up alone. And in case you haven't noticed, there are no owls around. I'm not going to be expelled, because the Ministry hasn't detected my use of magic. And even if they did, I doubt Professor Dumbledore would sit back and let them expel me. We may not be getting along right now, but neither of us hates the other. If push came to shove, he'd still do everything in his power to keep me in school, I'm sure."

Remus started to relax. He knew what Harry had said about Dumbledore was true, and was mildly interested in how Harry's magic use had gone undetected, but was more shocked at the news that he'd been followed by Order members. If Snape alone had shown up, he might have thought that it was the action of a single person. But if three had shown like Harry had said, then it was certainly Dumbledore's doing. Remus was a little hurt that he hadn't been told, not that he would have agreed.

"Harry, how do you know that there were others at the park? And please believe me, I had no idea I was being followed."

"Don't worry, I know. I guess it was Dumbledore's idea. That's just one small thing he's done lately that's caused me to no longer trust him. It'd surprise even you how manipulative and sneaky he really is. I still don't know what house Dumbledore was in when he went to Hogwarts, but I've been wondering if it might be Slytherin. Even though it's for the greater good, as he says, I think he's been in power too long. He thinks of others too much as pawns, and not as equal partners in the fight against Voldemort. I don't think he's doing it intentionally, he just doesn't understand how deeply his actions effect other people. Especially people who aren't given a choice, like me. And about the invisibility cloaks, I've learned to see through them. It's easy when you have your own to practice with. I expected Dumbledore to do something like that, so I was expecting more than just you to show. That's why I had the portkey ready. I'm glad it worked too, I wasn't sure if it would bring us to the right place. I kind of rushed in making it, and didn't have time to test it out beforehand."

Remus blanched. "You m-made a portkey? How, that's im-impossible!"

The look on Remus's face was priceless; and Harry had to choke back a grin. "No, it's not impossible, just difficult. I've been studying them since the summer started, but that's the first one I've made that travels more than a five mile distance."

The answer wasn't enough for the werewolf. "But, you can't just learn to make a portkey out of thin air! It's a Ministry controlled spell, only those authorized know how. I can't even make a portkey!"

"I doubt Barty Crouch Jr. was a Ministry employee when he made the Triwizard cup into one." Harry retorted. "It's possible to learn how if one's willing to break a few rules. I'll explain more if you want later, but we haven't much time. It's past six, and the sun will set in a few minutes. Don't you want to know why I called you?"

Remus looked puzzled. "Harry, that's not even among my top fifteen questions. I've practically been assigned a list to ask you. I just assumed you wanted to assure us all that you're OK, and that you'd decided to come back to headquarters with me."

"I've never going back to live there!" Snarled Harry. "I told Dumbledore that, and he better believe it! I called because I had another dream, and it presents an opportunity."

Harry spent the next half hour describing the second dream he had to Remus, and told him what he hadn't told Dumbledore about the first one. He described how the dreams were more clear than others had been in the past, and how he could actually feel what Voldemort was thinking. That's how he knew most of the information he acquired. Remus wanted to know how Harry had gained additional insight, but Harry avoided answering the question. There wasn't enough time before Wormtail could show up, and Harry was right in that the name earned him a guttural response from Remus.

"So Peter's coming here tonight, and will be entering the house alone?" He got a nod to his question. "Then he's a dead man!" He spat.

Harry had expected Remus to feel like that. The first time he had the opportunity to kill his former friend, he almost got to. Only Harry had stopped him from doing so, and look how that had turned out. But exposing Pettigrew was the only way to clear Sirius's name, even if it was in postmortem.

"Remus," Harry explained carefully, "I'll not get between you and Wormtail again. I learned my lesson, and a lot would have gone very differently if you had killed him the first time you wanted. Voldemort may not even have come back. But just remember, if you kill him,

Sirius's name will never be cleared. It doesn't mean as much to me now as it did when he was alive, but I'd still like to see his innocence proven. If killing Pettigrew is more important to you than that, then it's OK with me. I'll leave the choice to you. Just think about it, and don't act irrationally."

Harry could tell he had given the man a lot to think about, and for the first time that night, Remus stopped asking questions. Harry left him at the kitchen table with his thoughts.

"I'm going to have a look around, and set up some detection spells. They'll trigger when Wormtail shows, which could happen anytime. Take a moment, and meet me upstairs. I want to wait for him in Hermione's room. That's where he'll be heading, so that's where we'll wait for him."

Remus nodded and Harry left. He checked to make sure all the windows and doors were locked, and looked for any openings along the walls that a rat might be able to crawl through. But the Granger's home appeared to be well kept, and Harry was thankful that it was one less thing he had to worry about.

In his studies, Harry had come across a simple charm that he now put in place. It was intended for use by young parents, to make sure their kids didn't get into any cupboards or drawers that they weren't suppose to. When a drawer or door the charm had been cast on opened, a small crystal that the charms were tied to would heat up. The crystal could be worn around the neck or as a bracelet, and the parents would know that their kids were up to no good.

Harry had made the crystal earlier in the morning, and it was just the dried form of a simple potion. Once he cast the charm over all the windows and doors of the house, Harry put the crystal around his neck, and tucked it into both his shirt and dragon hide vest. Knowing he would likely see combat tonight, Harry wore his full set of dragon hide clothes, minus the cloak. It was too heavy to be practical, and Harry worried that if the fighting got dirty, which it most certainly would, that it would just get in the way. In a proper duel the extra protection the cloak provided might prove useful, but not when he

might be jumping behind furniture, or using some of the muggle techniques he had been practicing.

When Harry entered Hermione's room, he found Remus already there. It wasn't the first trip Remus had made to the Granger's home. Over the years, he had made a few trips during the summers to see if Hermione remained safe, and he'd even been staking it out since the arrival of Harry's first letter. But neither man had ever been inside before, and they each fought their curiosity to look through some of Hermione's things.

The bedroom was decorated just like Harry had imagine; books everywhere. Most were muggle books, both fiction and non, but a few wizard titles caught both their eyes. The furniture was made of a complicated wicker, and the walls had a flowery wallpaper on them that wasn't too overpowering. The whole house was impeccably clean, and Harry made a promise to leave it like that, even if he had to stay a whole day to repair any damage from the fighting.

Both men remained quiet as they waited for Wormtail to show. Harry had shown Remus the crystal he had set up, and explained how it worked. Remus was impressed, but saved any questions he had for later. The two briefly discussed how best to approach Wormtail once he showed, and agreed upon a plan. After that was out of the way, they waited in silence. Remus sat at Hermione's large desk, Harry on the bed.

Over an hour passed before the crystal Harry wore began to heat up. The charm didn't let the wearer know which door or window was being opened, but Harry's x-ray lens did a fine job. He stood up quickly as he got ready. Tonight, he would fight some Death Eaters.

"Remus, he's here," Harry whispered. "He just entered the same door we used, and he's searching the lower floor."

"How do you know?"

Harry hadn't told him about his magical lens, and preferred it that way. He remembered Pavarti's discomfort at the thought of Moody's magical eye, and didn't want to make people feel the same way about

him. That's why he lied to Remus earlier about being able to see through invisibility cloaks. He had neglected to mention he could see through everything else as well.

"It's the charm, I can sense where he entered." Remus also didn't know about the charm's shortcomings. "Get ready, he'll be at the staircase soon."

Remus nodded and got in position. The two had agreed that Harry would be the one to confront Wormtail at first, and hopefully it would startle him. Harry hoped the prospect of his capture for Voldemort would keep the Death Eater from running outside and bringing back the others. While Wormtail was concentrating on Harry, Remus would be hiding in the closet. He'd step out and stun or kill the man, he hadn't said which yet. If all went as planned, Harry wouldn't have to fire a single shot. However, Harry wanted a chance to use some of the spells he had learned, and almost hoped things got a little messy.

Boy, did he ever get his wish.

When Peter Pettigrew entered the Granger residence that night, he hadn't expected a lot. More than anyone else, he knew Harry's friends well from his years spent as Ron's pet Scabbers. That's why he knew that Hermione would never had left for vacation had she known that Harry had gone missing. Yet, he was ordered to go through her things, on the off chance he might find a clue. He had tried to get another to do the chore, perhaps someone like Lucius who would do anything to gain favor with the Dark Lord, but no one wanted to. The task was unimportant, so naturally it was left for him. At least his master had been kind enough to allow him to bring back up, something which had surprised Wormtail.

Now as he went through the rooms in the lower floor, making sure that he was alone and giving a half-hearted search for clues, Wormatail was already making excuses that he'd have to give his master about not finding anything useful. It wasn't a matter of whether he would be punished or not for proving useless, it was a matter of how much he would be punished.

The first floor was empty of anything meaningful, and the small man crept up the staircase slowly. The best bet he had at finding anything, no matter how futile it proved to be, was in Hermione's bedroom. So that's where he headed first. There were four bedrooms upstairs. The master suite was obvious, and Wormtail only poked his head in one of the guest rooms before he found Hermione's. What he found inside it was more than he had expected though.

There, sitting on the comfortable bed, staring straight at him, was none other than Harry Potter himself. A smarter man would have wondered why he was there, and why he seemed to be waiting. Peter Pettigrew however, was too overcome with greed to think about these things. If he could deliver Potter to his master, he might finally command some respect among the other Death Eaters. Not to mention the rewards he'd get for delivering the boy for his master to kill himself.

"Hello Peter," Harry greeted him, "I can't say it's good to see you again."

Wormtail was surprised at the almost jovial tone of Harry's voice. He became a little tense, but hid it well. One of the few talents Peter had was to hide his emotions when he needed to. The only one he couldn't fool was Voldemort.

"What are you doing here? No matter, you won't be staying long. To think I got sent here on a foolish errand, only to come across the golden prize!" Wormtail drew his wand, and noticed with satisfaction that Harry didn't have his. "Come with me quietly, and you won't get hurt."

Harry laughed. "I don't plan on getting hurt Wormtail." The laugh became much more vicious now. "That's more than I can say about you though!"

"What do you mean?" It didn't take a lot to make Wormtail nervous.

"I mean, look behind you. I'm afraid you're about to be cursed."

The Death Eater almost did look behind him. He had made his way into the bedroom now after closing the door. But Wormtail had seen enough cheesy muggle movies to know that it was all a ploy to distract him. Harry may not have a wand, but he knew that the young wizard had a knack for getting out of dangerous situations. He didn't avert his attention even a little.

"I'm not going to fall for that old trick. What do you take me for? An idiot?"

Harry smiled again, and looked over Wormtail's shoulder. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Expelliarmus!" Remus had just stepped out of the closet, and had decided to disarm his former friend. The small wizard flew back and crashed into the bed, and his wand sailed into Remus's waiting hand. Harry, not wanting to be close to Pettigrew, at the same time got up off the bed and went to stand next to Remus.

"Hello Peter!" Remus snarled. He had pocketed Wormtail's wand now, and was pointing his own right at the downed wizard.

At the sound of Remus's voice, Pettigrew froze in fear. He hadn't seen who had attacked him, and now he knew why Harry was so calm when first encountered. He recognized the cold voice, and remembered the last time he had heard it. He had barely escaped with his life that night. He only hoped to do the same again.

Slowly he turned around to face Remus. He was on the far side of the bed, and there were no windows or doors close enough to escape. He was doomed.

"Moony," he pleaded, "please don't! You got me, I give up! Congratulations! Just don't hurt me!"

"Hurt you?" Remus said icily. "I'm thinking about killing you! The only reason I haven't yet is because you alone can prove Sirius's innocence. But Harry said I could do either, and that it was my choice. So what should I do Peter? Kill you, or let you rot in prison?"

Wormtail turned to Harry. Remus was too emotional, and wouldn't listen to him. "Harry, please, stop him. You saved me once before. Please, I'll do anything you want!"

Harry's voice was just as unforgiving as his father's friend. "Really Wormtail? I seem to recall another time you said that. We've been here before haven't we? And what did you do last time, when I saved your life? You went and resurrected the bastard that killed my parents! And now Cedric, and Sirius, and so many others are dead, all thanks to you! I say let Remus do what he wants. Personally I think death is too good for you, but there's not a worse choice."

A frightful full minute passed for the captured Wormtail. A few times Remus raised his wand and looked like he was about to use it against him, but then stopped. Finally he lowered it, but not fully.

"I'd like nothing better than to end your miserable life Peter. To make you pay for what you've done to James and Lily, and to Sirius. And if there's any justice in the world, then they could continue to punish you in the afterlife. But it means a lot to Harry for Sirius's name to be cleared, and it means something to me as well. So you'll live, for now. You'll answer for your crimes, and finally confess. You'll also tell us everything you know about your master and his plans. Then maybe, if you've said something useful, I'll let you live."

Before Wormtail could utter out another word, Remus cast a full body bind on him. He snapped to attention, and fell back against the bed, stiff as a board.

"I'm proud of you Remus," Harry said. "It took a lot to do that. I'm sure Sirius and my parents would be proud."

Remus sighed. "I'm still not sure it was the right choice. Even when we turn him over to the aurors, there's always the chance he'll escape or be broken out. Even if he was seen, Fudge would only claim him to be an imposter. Only with a full trial can we finally clear Sirius's name, and that's a long time off."

He and Harry should have felt better about finally capturing Wormtail, but the seriousness of the situation prevented it. Remus was right in

that capturing Wormtail was a far cry from actually proving his guilt. The trial at the earliest would be held in a month, and that was plenty of time for something to go wrong. Especially with an idiot like Fudge in office, and Lucius Malfoy back in his good graces.

The two levitated Wormtail down the stairs and towards the side door. Due to security wards put in place on Hermione's house by the Order, it was impossible to apparate in or out right then. They decided to carefully go back to the portkey's arrival site for further conversation. Neither could see any other wizards through the windows, but wanted to be as safe as possible while they continued their discussion. Remus still had many questions to ask Harry, and Harry hadn't yet decided how many to answer. Both wizards were on the lookout for Wormtail's allies as they left the house, but found no Death Eaters.

Instead, they found the night air was cooler than they remembered. Too cold.

"Remus," Harry whispered, "is that feeling what I think it is?"

"What feeling? The cold?" Remus had felt the strong chill, but thought it unusual at best.

Harry couldn't believe that Remus couldn't sense them; it was almost overpowering. But then he remembered he was more highly effected by them than other wizards. Ever since his third year.

"Remus," Harry struggled to get out, "get ready for some company."

"Who?"

"Dementors!"

At Harry's statement, Remus grew rigid with fear. Although he was familiar with them, and had even been in their presence more times than he cared to count, he had never had to fight off a hostile Dementor. They had for years been under Ministry control, and only recently had abandoned their posts to side with Voldemort. He had been stupid to assume Wormtail's back up would be other Death Eaters. Those he knew he could handle. But of the two of them, only

Harry had experience fighting off Dementors. He hoped it would be enough. As the cold feeling and dampening effects became more pronounced, Remus conjured a happy memory for a patronus. It was a few years since he had last cast one, but the skill never left a wizard. It was like riding a bike.

"Remus, put Wormtail down in the bushes. This could get ugly. Hopefully there's only five of them." It amazed Remus how in control Harry was. He knew that he had been in this situation before, but then it had only been two Dementors. At least someone had their wits about them. Remus had totally forgot about the floating wizard behind him. And if they lost Wormtail, it really would have made Remus wished he killed him earlier.

He stashed his frozen prisoner in the bushes, and noticed with some satisfaction that the bushes had thorns on them. Then he went to join Harry. He could hear the start of voices in his head now; his parents' screams when they learned he had been bitten by a werewolf. He could only imagine what Harry must be hearing.

Which was a lot. The Dementors still weren't in sight, but Harry's head was exploding with dialogue of his parents' death, Cedric's murder, Sirius's falling through the veil, and a smattering of other unpleasantries. He would have passed out by now, if not for his advanced Occlumency training. As each voice called out in his head, Harry herded it into a subset of his inner mind sphere; one he designated for his life's horrors. Once the voices were in there they didn't completely disappear, but became muffled instead. It wasn't pleasant, but it was bearable.

Harry and Remus were back to back now, in the side yard between Hermione's house and her neighbors'. The Dementors should have been in sight by now, now that the sense of coldness and overwhelming fear was so strong, but none were visible.

That's because they were on top of the roof, unseen by the two wizards.

It was mere luck that Remus managed to look up before they attacked. He had wanted to see if the moon would hide behind a

cloud anytime soon, which might cut off their light source. What he saw instead were five Dementors, just as they leaped off the Granger's rooftop.

A normal man would have fallen like a sack, but the dark creatures floated down soundlessly. It gave Remus just enough time to push Harry out of the way, and raise his wand to meet them.

“Expecto Patronum!” Two Dementors were nearly on him when his silver wolf rushed out of his wand. It wasn’t the most powerful patronus he’d ever cast, but in the surprising moment it proved to be enough.

The two Dementors split at the confrontation with the silver animal totem. Each Dementor headed in a different direction, one north of Harry and Remus’s position, the other south. The patronus, not being able to choose which direction to travel, remained in the middle, and soon vanished. Meanwhile the other three creatures had joined their brethren on the ground. The five completely surrounded the two wizards, quickly closing in from a distance of twenty feet.

Harry had just picked himself off the ground when he noticed the five beasts surrounding him and Remus. They resumed their back to back stance, and Remus was getting ready for another volley.

“Harry! Cast your patronus towards the street! When they scatter, run for your life! We’ve got to get out from between them!”

Harry didn’t say a word, instead he drew up a happy memory, waiting for the Dementors to get just a little closer. The nearer they were, they more they would run from his stag.

When the Dementors were only ten feet away, he felt like that was plenty close for him. It was him that ordered Remus around now.

“Remus, now! EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Remus had gotten the spell of a little sooner than Harry, and his silver wolf was the first to take form. It was larger and more defined than the first time, and just as effective. It did indeed drive a wedge

between the Dementors, but neither Harry nor Remus had to run towards the street. Not to mention they couldn't; they were frozen from shock at what else they saw.

On the tail of Remus's wolf patronus, Harry's formed a second later. It was the familiar shape of Prongs, the animagus form of his father. Only this time it was much larger than it had ever been before; not to mention a different color. Harry's patronus was gold!

The huge form of Prongs raced to the rightmost Dementor, and impaled it with his antlers. A high pitched shriek that couldn't possibly be human issued from the dark creature, as it was torn and mangled. The Dementor wasn't just rushed off by the patronus; it was shredded to pieces. The robe clad husk collapsed on the ground a moment later, and Harry's stag headed for the next Dementor.

As Remus stood watching the spectacle, he didn't even think to recast his own patronus. It wasn't needed. The two wizards stood side by side, and watched as all the Dementors were made short order of. The fallen creatures still emitted futile life signs as they withered on the ground, but there was no need to worry, they weren't a danger anymore.

At last the gold patronus was finished, and returned to the one who had cast him. At Harry's side, the stag gave a deep bow to his maker, and then vanished.

"Ha-Harry?" Remus stuttered. "What just happened?"

Remus had to repeat the question before he got a response.

"I don't know. I didn't know that was possible. Did you?"

Remus turned to look him squarely in the face. "Harry, nothing like that has ever happened in wizarding history. If I'm not mistaken, those Dementors are either dead, or dying. It's supposed to be impossible to harm a Dementor. The only spell useful against them is the Patronus Charm, and that only drives them away. At least till now. What did you do differently?"

Harry thought about it. The only thing he could think of was the Occlumency techniques he had been using. When he called upon a happy memory to use, he instead called upon the whole subset of his happy memories. They were all tied together in a sense, so it was possible he used the strength of all his happy memories, not just a single one.

He couldn't get into that with Remus now though. It would take too long to explain the full details of his Occlumency training, and the ground was littered with rotting corpses. Some were still showing signs of life, but not many.

"I think I might know, but I'm not sure. I'll tell you later. Anyways, we've got bigger problems. What do we do with five dead Dementors?"

But before Remus could answer, another voice spoke up. Or rather hissed. It seemed that Seth had something to add, which was very unusual in itself.

"Dementor? Why do you call the soul-eatersss that name?"

Over the last few weeks, Harry had gotten used to his mostly silent new friend. The single companion he had had with his former master all those years ago had conditioned Seth to be very quiet, and often times he went the full day without even speaking to Harry. The only time he had really talked was when Harry had been decorating his house. Seth had made a few useful suggestions about some of the guest rooms when he saw that Harry was running out of ideas, and they had surprisingly been very good ones.

The only time Seth was guaranteed to talk was the half hour before Harry fell asleep. While meditating and organizing the day's thoughts in his mind, Harry conversed with the small snake. The topics were never the same twice, the conversation intelligent, and it helped Harry wind down from a hard day of training.

"Soul-eatersss? Is that what you call them? Wizardsss today call them Dementorsss. They've been working for the Ministry guarding

the prison for many yearsss, but have recently left and gone to Voldemort. How do you know about them?"

"Harry?" Remus asked. "Why are you hissing at your hand?"

It took a moment for Harry to remember that Remus had never heard him speak Parseltongue before, and he also didn't know about Seth.

"Sorry Remus. I forgot to introduce you to Seth." Harry held up his hand for Remus to see. "It's a ring I bought in Diagon Alley, in the same shop I bought my watch. Later at home, I found out the snake wasn't just animated like I thought, but he was ensouled instead. Seth was made by a lonely wizard a long time ago; I haven't figured out when yet. Since that wizard died, he's been passed along from one person to the next. Nobody spoke Parseltongue till I came along, so I'm the first who can understand him. He just asked why I call them Dementors. I answered, and asked how he knew what they were. From what I gather, the old wizard who made him led a very sheltered life. I'm surprised he's knows what a Dementor is."

Remus nodded and said something else, but Harry tuned him out so he could listen to Seth's response.

"My old master was one of the dark wizardsss who created the foul beastsss. It wasss before I was made, but he talked about it many yearsss later. They actually aren't beastsss at all. They're the life forcesss of dark wizardsss who have died. Before death the dark wizardsss performed blood ritualsss to prolong their livesss. While their physical bodiesss would die, their magical essencesss would live on. The tale you told me of this Voldemort soundsss very similar. But while your Voldemort existed only as a spirit after hisss death, these dark wizardsss became more. Besidesss the blood ritualsss they had performed, they created a spell that would give new formsss to their spiritsss.

"My master was part of a council of seventeen dark lordsss that performed the first spellsss. Each dark spirit became a soul-eater. At first they were weak, but with each soul they took, they grew in power. It was because of them that my master turned from his evil waysss. The soul-eatersss eventually broke away from the dark lord council,

and yearsss later they ate the soulsss of his wife and children. He long studied waysss to reverse the effect, but never succeeded. I know not the golden spell you just cast. In my master'sss time it was impossible to harm, or even control a soul-eater."

"It's still supposed to be impossible," Harry muttered.

At Remus's questioning look, Harry quickly repeated what he was just told by Seth. He had understood the first time hearing it the huge implications of this new knowledge. As he repeated it for Remus, it sunk in even further. Remus was just as blown away as Harry.

"Harry, do you know what this means? No one alive knows the history or origins of Dementors, and your talking ring of all things just gave you more information than is written in hundreds of books. That ring must be a lot older than it looks."

The two would have gone on longer discussing the ramifications, but were interrupted as the five Dementor bodies all gave one last heave, and then stopped. Harry hadn't the nerve to poke at them with his foot. He certainly wasn't going to peel back a hood and take a look underneath. It was just as well though, as the black robes suddenly turned an ash grey, and then turned to dust in front of their eyes. Then they made another sound, but this one wasn't one of misery, it was one of relief.

From each of the five piles of dust and ash, a countless number of small white vapors rose. Most evaporated into the night air, some others hovered about for a moment, then also disappeared. But a small number grew in size, until they became the unmistakable forms of actual people. They weren't ghosts as Harry and Remus knew them, but the forms came very close.

"Re-Remus?" It was Harry's turn to stutter. "What are those?"

"I don't know." It seemed tonight was full of surprises.

It was good that someone, or rather something, knew what was going on. One of the larger forms drifted towards the two. As it approached

it took on further definition, and the male form spoke in an old form of Anglo-Saxon.

Luckily Remus the scholar could interpret the dead language, and translated for Harry. After a lengthy conversation, the ghost form stopped and Remus turned to Harry. Remus had an odd look of amazement and fear on his face.

"Harry, you're not going to believe this! However you did it, when you killed those Dementors, you released all the souls they had ever eaten. Imagine! Every single person ever kissed by the Dementor is now free. From what I was told, all evil souls were destroyed with the original dark wizard spirit. The most recently ingested souls went to seek out their bodies; to see if they're still alive. Other souls moved on, to where I have no idea. The afterlife I would guess. These that remain are the ones that have nowhere else to go. I don't know what that means exactly, but they either can't move on to the afterlife, or don't want to. Frances here was a farmer, and he says he's seen too many horrors living inside a Dementor for over fourteen centuries. He says he's not comfortable moving on until he can see enough good to counter the evil. As you freed him, he's asking you what to do."

"What do I know about what souls do after they're dead? Tell him I'm the last person he should be asking!" It was all too much for Harry. No longer in danger, he sunk down to his knees and put his hands up to his head. Now was not the time to decide the future for so many. From the looks of the translucent spirits, there were over fifty of them. "Remus, I have no idea what to do!"

Remus wasn't listening however. He was now pacing back and forth, talking in hushed tones to himself.

"....this changes everything. Probably get awarded the Order of Merlin, first class for this. But they'll want to know how Harry cast the charm, and he doesn't know. Plus he's not allowed to do magic out of school; I still have to find out about that. Flitwick might have some answers. He's an expert on the Patronus, he taught me after all. I'll floo him tonight, when I get back to headquarters...."

Remus continued on in his ramblings, and Harry began to see the humor in the situation. What had happened must have easily been the most important wizard discovery since all twelve uses for dragons' blood was discovered, maybe even longer! No one could possibly know how to handle the situation, not just Remus and Harry.

Harry looked up to the spirit forms, wondering what he was going to tell them. As he did, he noticed a rustling in the brush behind where Remus was still pacing. There was someone coming out from the bushes.

Wormtail! In all the commotion of the Dementor attack, and the following revelation of the released souls, they had forgotten about their discarded prisoner. Harry didn't know how he broke out of the full body bind he had been in, but he had more than a half hour to do it.

It was pure luck that Harry was on his knees, in position facing the bushes. Remus still hadn't noticed, and Wormtail was closing the seven foot gap between the two. He wasn't armed with a wand, but that didn't matter. To Remus, he was armed with something much more dangerous. He was armed with his hand!

The magical hand Voldemort had gifted him at his own resurrection ceremony hadn't lost its significance to Harry. He knew that the silver hand was mighty dangerous to his werewolf friend, but he had no idea how dangerous. Could just a simple touch kill Remus? Did the silver have to get into his bloodstream to hurt him? Or were the muggles right, and only a silver bullet could do the job? Harry didn't plan on finding out.

He could have easily flicked his wrist to retrieve his wand, but Harry didn't. It wasn't because he was scared; the incident in Knockturn Alley prompted him to practice his draw endlessly. Instead, instinct told Harry to reach for Hedwig's wand in his boot holster, which was in easy reach from his kneeled position.

"IMPEDIMENTA!"

Instead of a beam of light like what was supposed to happen, a searchlight erupted from Harry's wand tip, enveloping both the attacking wizard and the still oblivious Remus.

The spell, which Harry had learned in preparation for the third task years before, was only intended to slow down a person or object in its path. Instead, Harry's spell caused both men to stop moving all together. He supposed they could have been moving at a very slow pace, but if so it couldn't be detected by the human eye.

"Whew! That was close!" Harry remarked to himself as he stood and approached the two others. Upon further examination, it was closer than even he first realized. Wormtail's silver hand was raised in a fist, and was frozen in a downwards swing aimed at Remus's head. The two body parts were less than a foot apart.

Not wanting to chance accidental contact, Harry used a *mobilicorpus* spell to levitate Remus away from the offending hand. Once at a safe distance, he set Remus down and ended the spell on him.

"Finite Incantatum."

Remus looked puzzled for a moment, as his location had changed and Harry was all of a sudden in his face. Before he could ask, Harry pointed over his shoulder at the still frozen Wormtail, and all was understood. Remus's face turned green as he realized how close he came to death.

"How close was his hand?" Remus didn't really want to know, but at the same time he had to.

"Less than a foot. It was close. If you want to rethink your decision about him, I'll understand. I'm almost willing to kill him myself."

"No, whether he attacks me or another, it doesn't change anything." The werewolf had apparently decided to stick with his earlier decision. "It's just another charge he'll have to face. But Harry, what spell did you use. It wasn't the body bind, because he'd have fallen over."

"I used Impedimenta. I was aiming at Wormtail, but my wand's a little temperamental at times. I guess I got carried away, and the spell hit both of you. As long as it worked, I don't mind." Harry held up his wand to show Remus.

It was yet another shock for the older wizard. In his time teaching Harry, both in class and during their private sessions, he had come to recognize the boy's wand. The one he now held wasn't it. Not to mention that it was hard to stop the motion of one man completely with the spell, let alone two.

"Harry, how'd you get a new wand? And where's your old one? Is that the wand you used to cast the gold patronus with?"

"Sorry Remus," Harry responded, "too many questions for now. I've got answers for you, but let's go somewhere more comfortable. But first I need to take care of a problem. I can't let anything like this happen again."

Harry re-holstered Hedwig's wand, and drew his more familiar one. The spell he had in mind wasn't one he was very familiar with, and he wanted to be sure he got it right. Slowly, he made his way over to Wormtail and his silver hand.

"Harry?" Remus questioned. "What are you doing?"

"Just undoing some of Voldemort's handiwork. I'm not sure if this will work, but I have an idea it will. Stand back, I don't want any to splash on you."

Before Remus could ask what he was talking about, Harry leveled his wand at Wormtail's magical hand and spoke an incantation he had never used before; only read about.

"Ferverfacio!"

Remus wasn't familiar with the incantation, but he could plainly see its effects. A narrow beam of white shot towards the silver hand, and Harry focused it at its base where silver met flesh. Slowly, very slowly, the white light intensified to a soft blue, and the silver began to glow

white hot. Then unmistakably, small beads of silver started to drip off the metal hand. The spell was melting the silver!

Harry's brow furrowed in concentration as the beam of light became wider, but no less bright. The whole hand was enveloped now, and silver started to flow off in rivers. Wormtail's robes started to burn, and Remus's delicate olfactory glands even picked up the smell of burnt flesh. It seems that to make sure he got the whole thing, Harry was aiming a little above where he need to on Wormtail's arm.

The Impedimenta spell must have really frozen him in place, because Wormtail made no sound, and his face showed no discomfort. Remus couldn't say the same. Now that the silver had all run to the ground, he could plainly see an open festering wound. The blood flow had been frozen in time as well, but that didn't stop the bright red veins from showing, or the grisly white of hewn bone from poking out of the severed limb. It looked as if Wormtail had only just cut off his hand, instead of two years prior.

"Harry, what did you just do?" Remus had never heard of a spell like that. The temperatures required to melt silver were incredible, and nothing he knew could even approach it.

"I used a metalworking charm I read about. In the sixteenth century, blacksmith wizards used it to fashion cutlery, jewelry, and decorations. It hasn't been used much since, but when I read about it being able to melt almost any metal, I studied it for just this occasion. I didn't know Wormtail would get so close to being able to use his hand tonight, but I knew it was always a possibility. Now even if he does escape, he won't pose a threat to you."

Remus grimly nodded. He knew Harry was right, but it still seemed cruel to do. "We can't just leave the wound open like that. The moment you unfreeze him, he'll bleed to death."

In silent reply, Harry cast a cauterizing spell on the limb. It was an advanced spell he hadn't practiced before, but Harry didn't really care how carelessly it worked. If it left a huge scar, all the better. When he was done, Harry turned to Remus and saw the man was still a bit

queasy looking. Harry didn't know if it was from the wound, or the fact that Harry had caused it. He feared the latter.

"Don't look at me like that; I didn't chop off his hand! The stupid git did it himself!"

Remus barked out a loud laugh at the inappropriate joke. But it lightened the mood considerably, and Harry decided to move onto another topic.

"Now we've got to get rid of all these spirits. Any ideas?"

Remus laughed again. "None at all! I suppose they could follow you around until you decide what to do with them. They could be your posse!"

Harry growled. "Not funny. I just don't have the time right now to deal with this. I expect to be up half the night as it is just answering your questions. Stay here." With Remus left to guard over Wormtail, Harry walked back to the form of Frances the farmer.

He couldn't speak Anglo-Saxon, so Harry called over another spirit who spoke English, albeit an older form. A quick conversation later, he was back at Remus's side. The spirits had started away, traveling to the north.

"What did you tell them?" Asked Remus.

"I told them I had no idea what they wanted of me, and I had no time right now to figure it out. So I told them to take some time to explore the world, sort of to catch up with the times. In four weeks they'll meet me back at school. I told them about Hogsmeade, and the Shrieking Shack. I hope you don't mind me using it, but I told them to stay in there so they don't draw attention. Hopefully by then I'll know what to do."

"Good answer," replied Remus. Again, Harry showed wisdom beyond his years. It was starting to surprise Remus less and less.

"I thought so. Anyways, now that that's taken care of, let's get out of here. I believe you have a list of questions to ask?"

Another laugh from Remus. "The Order will have to wait. I've got my own bloody questions to ask first. So far I've gotten very little answers, and have only learned more things to ask about!"

Harry smiled. "Good, that's part of what I want to talk to you about. But let's get out of here first." With some quick wand work, Wormtail was unfrozen, and then stunned, body bound, and shackled just for good measure. He wasn't getting away again as easily. But without his magical hand, Harry doubted he had the power to counter anymore curses.

"Ready for another portkey trip?"

Remus blanched. "Another one? Never mind, I don't even want to know. Let's just do this."

Harry motioned to his watch, and placed Wormtail's remaining hand on it as well. One of the many functions of the watch was an emergency portkey, which could be set to any location, and activated by a key word. Harry had learned about this weeks ago, and had even used it already. It differed from a normal portkey in that he hadn't had to cast the *Portus* spell on his watch; he just had to set it while standing in the place he wanted to transport to. That's what Harry used now to transfer Remus, Wormtail, and himself.

"Soccer." It wasn't the most creative key word, but it was one that he wouldn't say accidentally. Being the American term for football, and a muggle sport at that, Harry couldn't think of a single situation where he might use the term in a normal conversation. Even Dean Thomas had never used the word, and he was crazy about football.

The small circle above the watch's 6 lit up a pale yellow color, and when it faded back to white, the three travelers were standing in the basement of Harry's apartment building. They hadn't fallen down this time, either because they were prepared, or because the portkey was different than most others. Harry didn't care; it was refreshing not having to get up from a sprawled pile on the floor.

He had chosen the basement of his building because it was rarely used. The only thing down there was the building's rec room and utility meters, and they were both on the other side of the long hallway. Having the arrival point here instead of in his apartment allowed Harry to bring guests, who hadn't yet been told the secret of where he lived. It was also a great destination for him to escape to, if the situation ever arose. Harry still didn't know what to do with Remus, but now had a chance to figure it out.

Wormtail was cast carelessly aside, but kept an eye on as Harry conjured two chairs to sit in. He motioned for Remus to take one, and sat in the other as he likewise conjured tea and biscuits for the two of them. The basement's damp setting wasn't an ideal spot for a snack, but it would have to do for now.

"Is this your idea of a more comfortable place to discuss things? Harry, please don't tell me you've been living in a basement for an entire week!" Remus looked around in the dark shadows as Harry poured the cuppa. It was a good thing Remus wasn't paying too much attention.

As the two tucked into the warm brew, Harry came right out with his major concerns.

"Remus, I have no problem answering any and all of your questions. But I don't want to share anything with the others." He didn't have to mention Dumbledore by name. "I know everyone's only trying to look out for me, but lately that's been coming at a cost of my personal freedom. Last summer I was practically a prisoner at headquarters, and I have no doubt this summer would have been even worse. I had a funny thought earlier this summer. I thought that Dumbledore and the Order would keep me safe no matter what, even if they had to lock me in a Gringott's vault to do so. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Remus nodded. He understood perfectly, but the others didn't have any other suggestions as to what to do with Harry. Calmly, he explained this to the boy. Harry had a response for him though.

"What they don't understand, and what I've been trying to say for more than a year, is that I want to make the decisions having to do with my own life; or at least be part of making them. I know I'm in danger; I'm not stupid. But I still won't give up all my freedoms. I don't see why a compromise can't be made, but Dumbledore would never agree to it. Even the slightest chance I'd get hurt is too much for him, and that's why this whole thing with me running away started. That, and Dumbledore hasn't been honest with me, ever. He's been lying and skipping over truths ever since I met him."

Harry had to give some examples to Remus to make his point, and told about some of the conversation he'd had with Dumbledore in his office at the end of the previous year. The only topic he avoided was mention of the prophecy. He also told Remus about his family vault and the letter his parents had left him. He told how Dumbledore was watching over the amounts of money he spent. He told about how Dumbledore manipulated members of his own Order, as evident by the three cloaked figures who had followed Remus to the park that evening. Harry also explained how he felt betrayed that Dumbledore went against his parents' wishes. He'd placed Harry in the safest home possible, at the sacrifice of also being in the most loveless home possible. James and Lily never would have wanted that for their son.

In retrospect, Dumbledore had always explained his actions in as brief of a way as possible. Now Remus knew why. The man was unscrupulous! No wonder Harry had rebelled. Any sane person would have done the same if they were told the same lies, and grew up in the same environment. Just the one short conversation with the Dursleys was too much for Remus; he couldn't imagine a whole childhood with those dreadful people.

"So Remus, you understand, at least in part, why I don't want to have anything to do with Dumbledore or the Order. As individuals, they're all fine. Well, maybe not Snape. But when they get together to dictate my life, I'd rather be kissed by a blast-ended-skewt, because at least then I have an idea of what's happening. So if you still want to ask all those questions you can, but first you have to promise not to tell Dumbledore or the Order anything. When you return, you can tell them that I'm fine, and we had a nice long talk, but you can't even tell

them the littlest facts. That I can do magic, that we were attacked tonight, about the released spirits; nothing. I promise to tell them all in time, but not now. Probably not till school starts at the very least, possibly longer. It's up to you. If you want to know about me, then they can't."

The question wasn't a tough one for Remus. If he had to carry the secret for Harry, if only to know that he was safe and how he was able to do the things he had performed so far, than he would. Dumbledore would hopefully understand the need to gain Harry's trust. The other members of the Order wouldn't, but Remus could stand up to them. It's not as if any of them were close friends. His last had been Sirius, and now only Harry was left to fill that void.

"OK, I agree." It was that simple.

"Great," Harry smiled, "then let's get out of this dump." The two stood, and with a wave of his wand the teapot and chairs disappeared. Harry led Remus to the lift entrance with Wormtail trailing behind, and pressed the button to call for it. Remus said nothing, but was wondering how Harry had managed to possibly rent a flat being underage. He didn't have to wait long.

The building still had no other tenants, so Harry was sure the lift would be empty when it arrived. Once the three were inside, with Wormtail levitated in a vertical position because of the lack of room, Harry turned to face Remus.

"Remus, repeat after me. Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor."

Remus didn't repeat, but his eyebrows crawled into his hairline. A quick glance at the bank of elevator buttons confirmed his suspicion, that apparently there was no thirteenth floor. Which could only mean that....

"Harry, you didn't! You couldn't have?"

"If you're referring to me placing the entire thirteenth floor of this building under the Fidelius Charm, then yes I did, and I certainly

could have!" He was grinning like the cat that ate the canary. "Remus, say Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor."

Remus almost didn't. If he said it and it was true, then god knows what else Harry had been up to this summer. He thought the portkey programming had been impressive, as Remus didn't know how to make one. But a Fidelius Charm! It was unheard of. In fact, the only person he knew that had ever cast the spell had been Dumbledore. For both Lilly and James, and Grimmauld Place, he had been the one to cast the charm. Even if Peter had been the actual secret keeper that once, it was Dumbledore who had actually done all the spell work at Godric's Hollow. Peter had only activated the spell. How on earth had Harry learned this? There was only one way to find out.

"Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor."

And Remus's worst fears came true, as a new button appeared and pushed aside a few others. Harry pressed it, and the lift began its climb. The ride couldn't have been that long, but to Remus it seemed to last an eternity.

Finally, with an annoying little "ding" the lift doors opened, and Remus immediately assumed they had pressed the wrong button by mistake. The space before him was incredible. A huge fireplace was directly in front of him, off in the distance. It was made of flagstone and ornate Italian marble, and had crafted owls and lions engraved in the mantelpiece. To either side of the fireplace was open space, housing some of the most comfortable and expensive looking furniture he'd ever seen. Yet, as nice as the place looked, it wasn't oppressive like so many museum-like homes. It had a comfortable, lived-in look that was very inviting. So inviting, that Remus was the first to step out of the lift. Harry followed him, and slapped him on the back while the two stepped down the entranceway steps.

"Remus, welcome to my home!"

It was a good thing the house-elves had already retired for the night, because the additional shock would have most certainly killed Remus right then. The man couldn't even form a sentence! Harry took pity on him and led him to one of the leather armchairs in the living room

area. He himself took a seat on a nearby couch, and summoned a butterbeer. It was one of his last five. Apparently the magical cases did have a limit, and Harry estimated it at about eighty bottles per case.

It was half past nine when the two stepped out into Harry's new home. Four hours later, Remus still had many questions.

Harry had spent the time wisely going over his actions for the past weeks. He didn't mention anything about using the time tuner, but left out little else. As his duplicate selves were in his trunk where they always were, he didn't have to worry about Remus seeing them. Besides, if they had already lived through this experience, then they knew that Remus was present. As the thought struck him, Harry promised to have a discussion with his other selves about the night's events, and why they hadn't warned him about the Dementors.

The first onslaught of questions came after Harry described his first trip to Diagon and Knockturn Allies. He explained more about what he had learned in Gringotts, and told Remus about all of his purchases. He pulled out some of the books he had bought, both the legal and illegal copies, to show him how he had learned to program portkeys and learned the Fidelius Charm. He even got to show Remus his new broomstick, and had to tell a detailed account of how he came about his new wand.

Remus couldn't believe that the brilliant white bird in front of him was the same snowy owl he'd seen so many times before, but the evidence couldn't be avoided. They had the same personality, the same eyes, and the phoenix responded to Harry's calls. That certainly explained the power of the new wand Harry had shown him.

At the mention of his guardian tattoos, Remus showed more than a fair amount of interest. Being the intellect that he was, he was very interested in the tribal tattooing process, and asked if Harry minded removing his shirt so he could take a look. Harry hadn't planned on it, but complied. Remus approved of the dragon hide vest, but said little else. That's because he too took a silent moment to appreciate the tattoos of the forms of his former friends. As he was facing away from Remus, Harry had no idea if the older wizard had broken down crying

like he had. Then again Remus had had some warning, and the tattoos weren't branded into his own skin.

His description of Occlumency likewise impressed his former teacher. Harry tried his best to describe the process he had gone through, but it felt incomplete. It was just impossible to explain something that had taken him weeks to understand himself. Remus did seem to grasp his hypothesis of harnessing all his happy memories in summoning his patronus, and agreed that it could be the cause of the golden stag. Remus suggested that Harry try to repeat the process when he had some spare time.

The trip into muggle London wasn't as exciting as the rest of his stories, but Harry spent the time to explain how he came upon the building he now lived in, and how he thought up the idea of hiding the entire floor. That led to an impromptu tour, which Harry gladly gave. It was satisfying showing off his hard work and meticulous detail, and Remus was more than impressed that Harry had transfigured everything from a box of toothpicks and a few scraps of metal and leather.

"Harry, it wouldn't surprise me if you could pass your transfiguration NEWT right now! This stuff is amazing, I couldn't even dream of half the things you've done!"

"Well," he blushed, "I had a lot of help from Dobby and Winky. They're in the one room I didn't show you. I sent Hedwig with a letter to them to ask if they wanted to work for me, and after giving a two weeks notice, they swooped in and have been taking care of me since. As far as I know, Dumbledore thinks they went off to work for a family of witches. Does he suspect anything?"

"Not a thing, at least he hasn't mentioned it. And with how we've been dissecting your situation, he would have brought it up by now if he thought Dobby had anything to do with you. It seems your hoax worked. I still can't believe you did all this!"

Harry agreed. "I can't believe it either sometimes. It's such a big space, I wonder if I'll ever use half the rooms I have. And there're a few spaces that are still empty. If fact, if you can't get your hands on

any Wolfsbane, feel free to use one of the empty rooms anytime. I'm sure it can be converted to be safe, and the Fidelius Charm soundproofs us to the neighboring floors. Just do me a favor, and stay on the west wing. They may not be able to hear you below, but I sure will."

Remus swallowed hard. It wasn't a grand gesture, but Harry had just offered to share his home; with him in his wolf form no less. It was an incredibly considerate act for such a young man.

"Are you sure? I don't want to intrude or anything. I still can use the Shrieking Shack if I ever need."

Harry shook his head. "No you can't. Remember, I told all those spirits to go there. I don't think they'd appreciate spending their time with another "Dark Creature." Besides, I'll hardly know you're here the place is so big. So far you're the only other person, besides the elves, that know of it. If you want, you're welcome anytime. Just don't tell anyone about it. Even though the charm protects it, I don't want to answer any uncomfortable questions."

"Like how you could just steal an entire building floor?" Remus asked. He wasn't judgmental, it was simply him stating a fact. "How many flats were on this floor in the first place? Eight?"

Harry answered. "Seven actually, and I already decided what to do about my taking the place. I admit, when I first found it, I didn't think about it much. I figured that if people didn't know it was here, then they wouldn't be missing anything. I was so excited, I guess I wasn't thinking straight. But Hermione would skin me alive if she found out I didn't pay rent for such a huge place. Once the building opens, I plan on making anonymous donations to the building manager. I'll figure out the rent for all seven flats, or I'll just ask what the whole building cost to construct, and pay my share. I'll decide later."

"Good idea. But you don't plan on telling her, do you? Or Ron? If they know, it'll be a lot harder to keep this secret." Remus cautioned Harry.

"Don't worry, I don't plan on telling them anytime soon. But in the future I most certainly will. Even Dumbledore will find out eventually,

but that's a long time coming. He's got a lot of things to make up for before I'd think about inviting him into my home. I didn't spend all this time just to make a summer place to stay, you know. I plan on living here for a long time. That's why there's so much room. Ten years down the road, if I'm still alive, I'll have quite a pad, don't you think?" The bad joke didn't cover the morbid slip he had made about possibly being dead just a few years from now. Unfortunately, it was a distinct possibility.

"I'm glad you see yourself getting along with Dumbledore in the future," Remus let Harry know. "By the tone of your two letters, some of us were getting worried about you. Anyways, it's getting late. Or rather, early. What do you want to do about him?" Remus pointed to the unconscious Wormtail; slumped by the front door. "If I can't tell the Order about tonight, it'll be hard to explain him. I guess I could always drop him at the Ministry instead."

"No, don't do that. He'd surely escape from them with Fudge in charge." Harry paused to think. He wouldn't mind leaving him stunned for a few weeks, but didn't know if it was possible. Plus, he posed a great security risk. He possibly knew too much about Harry's new abilities. He might have been awake during the Dementor fight, and could have seen too much. Harry didn't want to let Pettigrew be interrogated by the Ministry or the Order of the Phoenix until he knew for sure what he had witnessed.

"I'll take care of him. I'll stash him in one of the empty rooms I have, and fix up a cell or something." At Remus's worried looks, Harry only continued. "Don't worry, I've leaned a lot more than you've seen. I'll take care of it. If you're tired, why don't you spend the night? You can break in one of the guestrooms, and we can have breakfast tomorrow morning together."

It took longer to convince Remus to let him keep Wormtail then to spend the night, but eventually the older, and very tired wizard gave in. Who was he to argue? If Harry could conjure a golden patronus that could kill Dementors, program a portkey himself, perform the Fidelius Charm, and cast an impedimenta spell that could freeze two fully trained wizards; then he surely could keep one unarmed, and unhandled wizard safely behind bars. But he had one last question.

“Harry, what would you have done if I hadn’t agreed to not tell the Order anything? Or what if I’m lying?”

Harry laughed. “You’re not lying, I slipped a truth serum into the tea I served you in the basement. I can’t brew Veritaserum yet, but the one I used is strong enough for simple yes and no answers. If you hadn’t agreed, I never would have shown you up here. Then I would have wiped your memory, and portkeyed you back to the park. You never would have known seven hours had passed. You would still be waiting for me to show up for the meeting. But I knew you would agree, so I wasn’t worried.”

“You can obliviate too?”

“Sure,” Harry joked, “didn’t I mention it? You don’t think I went a whole month without having some fun with the Dursleys, did you? But I couldn’t very well have them remember I was using magic against them. So I wiped all three before I left. The only thing they remembered is that I stayed in my room the entire summer, and that they agreed to stay away from me.”

Remus joined in Harry’s laughing. “I wondered why they didn’t have a clue as to what you’d been up to. Not even they could be so neglectful. When I talked to them, it seemed they almost didn’t know who I was talking about.”

After the laughs died down, the two wished each other a pleasant sleep, and drifted off to separate wings of the house. Both had been worn out by the night’s many trials and tribulations, and were off to sleep moments after hitting their bed’s soft pillows. Harry really had done a great job in transfiguring them.

AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, that’s the first bit of action, hoped everyone liked it. I found it much harder to write than anything else yet, but figure I’ll only get better with practice. This chapter should also address a lot of questions reviewers had about Harry’s attitude towards various Order members. Anyone win some \$\$\$ betting on the Superbowl? I live in

Charlotte, and was disappointed the Panthers came so close to winning. If only Ray Finkle was the place kicker for the Pats; I would have killed for a ‘wide right!’ Anyways, next chapter should be about a week, give or take. The summer will end, and soon Harry will be back aboard the Hogwarts express. It’s about freaking time too. I’ve read whole stories and their sequels that haven’t been as long as my summer, but oh well. Oh, I also want to give credit to Horst Pollman (see my bio page) for the idea of the golden patronus. I’ve actually seen it a few times, but he was the first. I plan on explaining the ability differently, but the general concept is the same. I liked it so much I just had to steal it. Some people will complain it’s too much of a “superpower,” but remember Harry has at least one power that “Voldemort knows not of.” I plan on explaining in future chapters, and all I can say is give me a chance. Harry won’t be casting impossible spells, just difficult ones. But remember, he has been eating/breathing/sleeping training for the entire summer, thrice over. I hope that justifies his increased magical abilities to any pessimists. Later.

Updated 11/18/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I’ve gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected all that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there’s also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don’t, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 11 – Summer Days, Drifting Away

The next morning was as close to normal as Harry Potter could seem to get. Never having known the true meaning of the word, it was a fine start of day for him.

The elves seemed to know that Remus had spent the night, and when both wizards woke up to smells of frying bacon and the strong oriental tea Harry had taken a liking to, they were greeted with enough food to feed all six guest rooms; had they been used. Dobby and Winky were still a little nervous about eating with their master as he insisted, but the four found enough to talk about during the short meal.

Remus for his part took comfort in the fact that Harry hadn't been completely alone. Very unlike another house-elf he knew, these elves seemed to be perfect company for Harry. Kreacher was still bound to serve the Black family, now through Tonks, but was now even less helpful than he had been before Sirius's death. The truth was, no one in the Order knew what to do with him. So Remus admired the relationships Harry had with his elves. When he made the mistake of mentioning how refreshingly different they were from Kreacher, he came to like them even more.

"Kreacher is bad house-elf to tell master's secrets." Dobby had a feral look on his face. "Kreacher will pay for what he's done!"

Winky nodded in agreement, and Harry thought it best to steer the conversation away from the touchy subject. He let Remus know that he had built a small cell in one of the empty rooms, and that it was solidly constructed to not even allow a rat to escape. Wormtail now occupied an eight by eight foot cell, furnished with nothing but a bucket, a few muggle paperbacks, and a thin mattress pad and blanket. From the inside the walls were solid and soundproof, but on the outside they were transparent and allowed even the tiniest whisper to be heard. It was decided that Wormtail would be visited by Harry or the elves twice a day to be feed and to have his waste bucket emptied (by a spell of course), but that would be his only outside contact.

Remus only took a quick look in the room to satisfy his curiosity, and noted it would be impossible for Wormtail to escape. He thought the accommodations a little extreme, but they were still a far cry from what Sirius had spent twelve years in. Remus could live with that, and he kept his mouth shut.

It was half past eight when he was finally ready to leave the Hideaway, and Remus still had reservations about how he was going to handle Dumbledore and the Order. It appeared Harry had the same concerns, because he took the older man aside before he left. Harry wanted to make sure his secret, and not just the location of where he was staying, was kept safe.

"Do you have any idea what you're going to tell them?" Harry asked.

Remus thought for a moment before answering. "I'll tell them the truth, at least as far as I'm able too. Dumbledore will know if I'm lying to him, so I'll just tell him I promised you that I wouldn't tell anyone else. I'll assure them that you're fine and that you're perfectly safe, but I'll avoid any specific questions."

Harry wasn't so sure it would be that easy. He knew that Dumbledore, and to a lesser degree Snape, both had the experience to hack their way into Remus's mind, and find the answers they wanted. He didn't put it past either of them. When he voiced his concerns to Remus though, Harry was put to ease.

"It's true, both Dumbledore and Snape are master Legilimens. But that doesn't work on me, so don't worry. I never bothered to learn the art, because it's incompatible with werewolves. You see, however the curse changed my body, it also affected my mind. However slight or drastic the change was, my brain chemistry is now different than other wizards. I suppose it's possible to break into a werewolf's mind eventually with enough study, but it's never yet been done. And I don't think that Dumbledore or Snape are willing to spend the hours trying either. It would take weeks of trial and error."

Harry was surprised, as he hadn't read anything about this in the Legilimency books he had bought. While his own skills at Legilimency were so far amateur at best, he had already read massive amounts

about the subject. The few preliminary attempts he had performed, against his other selves and the Dursleys, each came with varying degrees of success. Just out of curiosity, Harry asked Remus if he could try and enter his mind.

Remus thought the idea novel. "Sure, but I don't really know what will happen. What do I do?"

"Just sit there and I'll try to access your memories about last night. Don't try to fight me off, as I want to see how your mind differs from others. If you sense that I'm getting in, then try and block me out. OK?"

Remus agreed, and Harry drew his wand. "Legilimens."

Unlike the times when he had cursed the Dursleys, or even himself, Harry felt no initial penetration. It was usually very quick, and the hard part came in sifting through foreign thoughts, and searching for certain memories. He had been most successful cursing himself so far, but Harry feared that was because he was intimately aware of his own mind. The Dursleys had proved to be much more difficult, but he had managed a limited success after long efforts.

With Remus however, the experience was much different. Instead of the penetration that occurred right away, Harry felt the spell rebound off an invisible barrier. The mental shield had a dark and untamed taste to it, and he assumed that it was tied to Remus's lycanthropy. Harry probed the barrier for awhile, and came to the conclusion that it couldn't be broken. He guessed that the werewolf curse reformed the mind just as Harry had spent hours doing to himself, but it was done at a much more primal and instinctual level. Subconscious even, so that not even Remus could tear down the walls erected around his own mind. Harry certainly had nothing to fear from others trying to learn secrets from Remus.

After the futile exercise, the two parted company after promising to keep in touch. Harry invited Remus to supper that Saturday night (it was then Wednesday, the second week in August), and the two agreed to see each other later. It would have been sooner, but Harry

wanted to catch up in his training schedule, and Remus feared he'd be having a lot of questions to answer.

Once alone, Harry made his way to shower and get ready for the day. Even though the first thing he did was normally run on the treadmill and workout a bit, he found it almost impossible to begin the day without his morning shower. Since he started using the bathroom in his trunk, Harry had become spoiled by the three shower heads and high pressure water system. The bathroom he set up in his suite was identical, except for the color scheme. In the past few weeks (or months) Harry had really come to enjoy the finer things in life. He wondered if he would ever again use the school bathrooms.

After a second shower, which followed forty minuets in his exercise room, and another thirty dueling against his other selves in the trunk's dueling chamber, Harry made his way to his new library to go over the day's plans. Since it had been set up, the library now housed the majority of his books. Only the texts his doubles were currently reading were left in the trunk. The vast room was still mostly empty, but Harry liked having his books on display for easier access. He briefly wondered how long it would take to fill every shelf in the huge room.

His actions over the past few days had caused Harry to go off schedule, and he had to find a way to resolve the problem. True he only lost two days at the most, but even that was the furthest Harry had fallen behind so far, and he didn't want to slack off. He was hoping to take a vacation the last few days of summer, but now wondered if it would be smart to scrap those plans. He had to keep an eye on Wormtail now; plus Remus wound be around more often. The four day trip he had planned (he was thinking of surprising Hermione with a visit) would have to wait.

With the trip cancelled. Harry actually figured he would be ahead of schedule with the extra days of training at the end of summer. True, the schedule would be pushed back, but he would still be where he wanted by the start of term. That being said, Harry decided to take the day off. It had been a long while since Harry had enjoyed any personal time. The five days spent decorating his Hideaway had brought him into muggle London many times, and had given him a

break from his physical training, but that week had been just as draining as any other. Besides, Harry also needed to restock on some potion ingredients and other supplies; it was time for another trip into Diagon Alley.

This time thankfully, the trip didn't require so much preparation. No extra trip to buy muggle disguises. No flagging down the Knight Bus at early morning hours. And no worrying about being recognized in the streets. Now being able to use magic, Harry prepared in less than a minute. He quickly changed his eye color to brown again, conjured a wizard hat to pull over his scar that matched his robes, and a second later Harry was standing in the apparition site of Diagon Alley. "Merlin," Harry thought, "that was so much easier!"

As Harry began down the street, an idea struck him to see if Amber from the robes shop would be available for lunch. It would have to be in muggle London to avoid being spotted, but he didn't think she would mind. For a brief moment Harry considered ignoring the idea altogether, but he pushed that thought aside. Even if it would be safer for them both, he had promised her he'd come to visit if he was ever in Diagon Alley again. Besides, he had enjoyed her company, and had enjoyed the quick peek under her robes even more. How could he not ask to see her?

Amber indeed was working at Madam Malkin's that morning, and was delighted to see Harry again. Even with the brown eyes and changed looks she recognized him, and was smart enough to not call his name out loud. After she informed him that her lunch break wasn't for another three hours, Harry left the shop so she could get back to work.

With three hours to spend, Harry couldn't figure out how to kill his time. The quick stop to the apothecary wouldn't take longer than fifteen minutes. Harry debated what to do.

His first intention was to visit Mr. Olivander to tell the story about the basilisk he promised, or to go see Walter Whiggman so he could give an initial report of the little flying he had done on his new broom. But Harry wanted to remain out of sight, and both those options required him to enter the very busy shops of either gentleman. With the start of

school only three weeks away, Diagon Alley was much busier than the last time he had visited.

So to kill three hours, Harry decided to visit Griphook and his family vault yet again. It would be his third trip, but now that he had time to kill, and wouldn't be emotionally distracted, Harry thought he could get a lot done.

Griphook was surprised to see Harry, but very happy as well. It seemed that since the last visit when Harry had complimented on his helpfulness to the bank managers, Griphook had been doing very well for himself. He was awarded with a promotion, and was no longer required to escort account holders to their vaults. For Harry though, he didn't mind.

A short stop at Harry's original vault informed him that nothing had changed, and in fact his money was already starting to replace itself. The interest accumulated for whatever investments his remaining money were tied up in had been deposited into his account. While it didn't make up for all the money he had spent and transferred, it did replenish a sizable dent. Griphook informed Harry that by Halloween his trust fund should be back to the same value it had been at the beginning of the summer.

In his family vault, Harry took more time to carefully go through some of the furniture and portraits. All were very nice, but not many matched the comfortable feeling his new home had. The furniture was much too formal, and the wizard portraits too medieval. Harry thought they might look good on the stone walls of a castle like Hogwarts, but not on the plaster walls of his new home. Besides, even the newest painting was of a relative at least five generations older than Harry, and Harry had no wishes to cut into his training schedule to learn all about his dead distant relatives. It might be interesting to do one day, but it wasn't a priority now. There were a few landscapes and still lifes that Harry liked though, and those he shrank and put in his pocket.

The six crates full of paperwork and investment information were harder to sort through, but Harry found a few things that he thought might come in handy. Apparently he owned stock in both magical and

muggle companies, and even had partner status in a few. Harry pocketed a few parchments that he vowed to read over more carefully later, and moved on.

The stacks of jewels Harry hadn't given much notice to before, as they seemed too unreal to him. He had experience with money, even if there was a large amount of it. But what does one do with dozens and dozens of cut and polished jewels? Remembering his promise to Hedwig, Harry pocketed a few, but only took some of the smaller, less expensive selections.

Five minutes later, with less than an hour before Amber got off for lunch, Harry left his family vault. On the cart ride back to the Gringott's lobby, Harry and Griphook traded polite conversation. A wizard and a goblin don't have much to talk about, but they found a few common topics that both could appreciate. Harry asked about Griphook's new job as an assistant supervisor for wizard tellers. In turn, Griphook asked how the Weasleys were treating him after they discovered the extra money in their vault.

"They finally discovered it?" Harry exclaimed. They hadn't said anything in their birthday letters to him, and Remus hadn't said anything either. He wondered when they had made the trip. Griphook let him know.

"Yes, late yesterday afternoon actually. I wouldn't normally know about such things, but I asked to be informed in case there would be some problems with them excepting the money. You mentioned that the family is remarkably proud, almost to the point of being stubborn. I took the liberty of seeing that things ran smoothly for you. As it turned out, there wasn't a need."

Harry didn't understand. Wasn't a need for what? He imagined the look the Weasleys must have shown at discovering the money, and he was sure that they would try to give the money back no matter what he had wrote. Harry asked Griphook to clarify.

"I simply mean that there wasn't a need for me to be notified, as the loud scream the woman let out could be heard two vault levels away in either direction. By the time I was officially informed, the family had

already been escorted back to the lobby and given a private floor connection home. The mother had fainted in the family vault, and still hadn't been revived. I believe she had three children with her, twins and a young woman. They looked equally shocked, but there was something else on their faces. If I was to take a guess, I'd say that all three had been laughing." Griphook laughed himself. "I thought by now they would have contacted you, either to show their appreciation or their disapproval."

Harry laughed too. He could see why Fred, George, and Ginny would find the situation funny. The three shared a perverse sense of humor that would have enjoyed watching their mother faint dead away at such a sight. Harry was glad it was those three who had escorted Mrs. Weasley, and not Ron. Ron would have just been jealous, and would need time to get over the fact. As he exited the mine cart and said goodbye to Griphook, Harry wondered why Ron wasn't with them. It wasn't like him to miss a trip to Diagon Alley.

There wasn't enough time left to visit the apothecary, and Harry didn't want to be burdened with smelly potion ingredients anyways, so he made his way back to the robe shop. Amber was ready and waiting, and had no problem leaving early. She was a little surprised however when Harry drew his wand and changed their robes into muggle clothes. He now wore a pair of slacks and a light blue shirt, and Harry transfigured Amber's robes into a form flattering red dress, which was neither too revealing nor matronly. She complemented the dress, and Harry directed her to the Leaky Cauldron and out the other side.

Amber didn't mind the foray into muggle London; in fact she seemed to really enjoy the experience. She admitted that she was a Pureblood who had little experience with muggles. Not that she thought bad of them, it's just that the few times she had spent in their part of London had been in large groups, and had been very brief as well.

She especially enjoyed the lunch they had together. She thought the whole experience of having a server wait on them to deliver the food and drink was a bit strange. She only understood the reason once Harry explained that there were no house-elves or magic to do it. The food was superb nevertheless, no matter how it had been prepared.

The nearby restaurant Harry had picked was well known for its selection of soft cheeses and aged balsamic vinegars, and both had a salad to take advantage of each. Amber had a Greek salad with freshly pressed feta, while Harry had a roasted almond-encrusted brie served on top a bed of baby greens. They even shared a bit of their salads with each other, and as far as dates go Harry thought it went pretty well. Certainly better than that tea shop business had gone the year before.

As the two walked back to the wizarding side of London, they talked about a few things, and Harry had to again explain why he wasn't around much. He didn't tell her the real reason of course, but she accepted what little he did say. He also knew it was probably the last time he would see her, and said he would write her from school if she liked. For her part, Amber understood that Harry couldn't be in a serious relationship, even a long-distance one. She did want to remain friends though, and promised to write Harry at school as well.

In the Leaky Cauldron, Harry transfigured their clothes back into robes and escorted Amber back to work. Just as he said goodbye and turned to walk away, he was grabbed from behind by his lunch date. The shop was empty except for them, so no one saw what happened next.

Before he had a chance to think, Amber pressed her lips against Harry's, and wrapped her arms around his waist. At first Harry was a little shocked, and pulled away slightly. But the strong grip Amber had on him didn't allow much room for retreat. As Harry fully came to realize what was happening, he began to give in. The kiss deepened and Harry placed his own hands on her shoulders, and tilted his head for comfort. He kissed her back, and fought hard not to let his hands roam. As willing as she may seem, Harry knew that the kiss couldn't go anywhere. It was a spur of the moment thing, which he didn't want to take advantage of. But Amber's enthusiasm, not to mention the mental pictures of her seen through his magical lens, tempted Harry to do just that. With a last nibble of his lower lip, Amber finally pulled away.

She must have sensed Harry's caution, because she spoke to address it. "Thanks Harry, today was great. Just remember, not all

relationships have to be as serious as you think." With a quick wink and a sly smile, she turned and walked through the back door, leaving one very confusing teenager behind.

Harry made short work of visiting the apothecary to purchase the supplies he needed. Not wanting to chance a meeting with Cho, he visited the shop in Knockturn Alley instead of the other. He replaced in bulk the NEWT level potions kit he had already worked through, and selected a few extra expensive and rare ingredients as well. Harry planned on working ahead of his classes if possible, and had plans for some advanced potion making. He wanted to be prepared and have the supplies on hand.

For the same reason Harry picked up another full set of cauldrons. Some potions required multiple days to brew, and this way he'd still have his classroom set for use. Plus having a new, top of the line cauldron set would keep Snape away from him. Not even he could find fault with a student being well prepared.

With his purchases shrunken and packed into his various pockets, Harry apparated back to his Hideaway, with still the afternoon left for training. He didn't get much accomplished though, as he couldn't get Amber's kiss and last statement out of his head. What had she meant? While doing his nightly meditation Harry finally figured it out, and hit himself over the head. He shouldn't have left so early.

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Little had changed in the two years since he had taught there, but Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was still as awe inspiring as ever to Remus Lupin. No matter how long it was between his visits, the castle always had the same effect on him. He remembered happier times of his youth, when he and his three closest friends gallivanted around like they owned the place. Even with the sufferings of all the pranks gone wrong, and the consequences of ones gone right, his memories were mostly pleasurable and lighthearted. This trip however, was not to be so.

Remus had spent the whole night dreading the long flight of stairs he was now climbing to the Headmaster's office; to report on what he had discovered. Since the whole meeting with Harry had been scheduled rather quickly the night before, there wasn't enough time to come up with a detailed plan. But Remus was fairly certain that Albus Dumbledore had expected him back later that night, not a full day later. How could he explain the large amount of time he spent with Harry, while not giving any of the information Dumbledore would no doubt want to know. Remus had thought about that the whole morning, and would have continued except that the spiral staircase to Dumbledore's office came to an end. With a heavy sigh, Remus knocked on the door.

"Come in, Remus."

A small chuckle escaped his lips as he opened the heavy door that separated him and what lay beyond. Remus only hoped that Dumbledore would be as understanding as he believed him to be, and that he wouldn't be asked to betray Harry's trust. As he entered the office, empty thank Merlin except for the two men, he muttered the punch line of a muggle joke he once heard. "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition."

Dumbledore gave a genuine smile at Remus's appearance, and greeted him thoroughly. "Ah, good afternoon Remus! I daresay I expected to see you earlier than this, but no matter. I trust that you have much to tell? Sit, sit please. Would you like some tea?"

Before Remus even got a chance to answer, Dumbledore conjured up a pot of tea with two cups, a pitcher of milk, and a small bowl of what looked like candy.

"I've recently taken to using lemon drops in my tea instead of sugar. I find them just as sweet, and the hint of lemon flavor goes nicely. I highly suggest trying it."

Remus smiled at the oddity of the man before him, but politely declined. The next few minutes would be very delicate, and might even put his membership in the Order of the Phoenix in jeopardy. Remus hoped not.

The two spent a few moments trading small talk. Remus had already been offered the role of advisor to the new D.A., and discussed with the headmaster what he had in mind. He hadn't discussed it with Harry yet, but felt the two could work things out well enough. And after what he saw Harry was already capable of, Remus felt that if anything, he might be holding the students back. Of course he didn't mention any of this to Dumbledore, but the two found enough to talk about.

An interesting tidbit of information, was that Dumbledore admitted he still hadn't filled the post of defense professor yet. He said he had a few ideas, the leading one which would give the position to Snape.

"Really, Professor?" Remus blanched. "I was under the impression that Severus has coveted the position for some time now, but for some reason you wouldn't allow him. Was I mistaken?"

"No Remus, not exactly. The popular opinion amongst the students that Severus has been after the position for years is not entirely true, but I digress. It's a personal matter that is more complicated than you could possibly imagine. Still, he is the best potions master I have seen in many years, and it would be a shame to lose him in that capacity. It's a problematic issue for sure, but let's get down to business. What can you tell me about Harry?"

Remus was surprised at the sudden change of topic, but was relieved at getting to the matter at hand. The two had been dancing around the issue of Harry so far, and it was getting tiring.

"Simply put Headmaster, Harry is fine. He's perfectly safe, well protected, and has no intentions of leaving where he is till the start of term. In fact, Harry's taken more precautions than I even thought possible. I expect he'd even surprise you." Remus smiled at this last point.

"Well that's good to know, and I don't doubt I would be very surprised. In fact, I already have been on more than one occasion. Like last night for example, when the two of you used an illegal portkey to

leave the meeting point. What can you tell me about that? Where did the portkey come from?"

"And just how do you know that we left the meeting place by portkey sir? I was the only one present to meet Harry as agreed, wasn't I?" Remus already knew the answer of course, but wanted to see Dumbledore's reaction. If all the things Harry had told him were true, there was more to the old wizard in front of him than he previously thought.

Dumbledore didn't bat an eye though. "Simple. After a period of time when you didn't return, I sent Alastor after you to see what happened. He detected a portkey having been used, and was a bit surprised, as were we all. Since I know that you are not currently able to program a portkey, it must have been brought with Harry. So now among other things, we need to know who Harry's been in contact with, and where that portkey came from. Whoever made it must be highly placed in the Ministry, and that's not necessarily a good thing at this time."

Amazing, Remus thought, that Dumbledore could work around the small elements of truth in his statement so efficiently. What little doubt about Harry's accusations about Dumbledore telling lies and half-truths was put to rest.

"Sorry Professor, but I know you're lying. I'm quite aware that not only Moody, but also Tonks and Severus followed me to the park last night. They were concealed under invisibility cloaks, and they could only have been there to either spy on me and Harry, or attempt to take him against his will. And what's more important than me knowing, is that Harry knows. In fact, he's the one who spotted the three and told me about it. When I said he was taking extreme precautions in his safety, I meant it. He saw right through the invisibility cloaks, having practiced against his own, and portkeyed us out of the park before any of the three knew what was happening. I myself wasn't aware what happened until I picked myself up off the ground from where we arrived."

"And where was that exactly?" Dumbledore's face hadn't yet revealed anything. It was a blank slate.

Remus didn't fall for the old trick though. By asking such a short, seemingly harmless question, Dumbledore hoped to have an answer before Remus even had time to think about what he was saying.

"Sorry sir, I can't tell you that. You need to understand how damaged your influence is with Harry. The whole Order knows that he isn't on the best terms with you at the moment. With what happened last night, I'd imagine that's truer now than ever before. Harry needs to trust someone, and for whatever reason he chose me. I don't plan on betraying that trust unless he gives me a reason to, or unless he's in danger. So before I answer any of your questions, I think I'm entitled to some answers of my own. You didn't just lie to Harry last night; you lied to me as well. You agreed that I could meet with him alone, and then you turned around and broke that promise, and jeopardized my already strained relationship with Harry."

A much older Dumbledore took a long sip from his tea, and considered his answer. When he finally did, it seemed to be almost a statement of defeat.

"Remus, I did not lie to either you or Harry, so much as I omitted parts of the truth. I've already had a discussion like this with Harry, and I expect he told you some of the things that have been bothering him this summer." Remus nodded an affirmative, and Dumbledore continued.

"I don't know the whole of what Harry has decided to share with you, but let's just say that the prophecy that speaks of he and Voldemort has serious implications. It's a huge burden to bear, no matter what the age of the person holding it. And more importantly, it's imperative that the information remains secret, at least for now. Voldemort or his people learning about the information could cause horrific things to happen. And as much as I trust Harry do to the right thing, he's still a boy. A boy who not always thinks with his head; but instead with his heart. Truly, it is an endearing quality, but in his position it is one we cannot afford.

"Whether he knows it or not, he needs the protection that I and the Order can provide. And so, even though it breaks my heart, sometimes I must do what is in his best interest, instead of what he

wishes for himself. He can't be allowed to fend for himself this summer. It's as simple as that. So I sent Severus and the others to bring him back to headquarters, where he'll be safe. I know that he doesn't like it there, and that he's upset at not having a say in the decision, but the situation is too far beyond his understanding to entertain his wishes.

"I have done many things I'm not proud of in my long years; but all for the greater good. This is one of those times that I wish I could find another way. But I know that's not the case. Harry must be looked after, at all costs. And you must help me. So please I ask again, where is Harry?"

Remus thought long and hard about Dumbledore's confession, and what he would say in response. Obviously he was expected to give up Harry's location, so that a team of Order members could go and retrieve him, like a lost pet. But Harry and Remus both knew already, thanks to some truth serum, that that wasn't going to happen. Remus still had to convince Dumbledore that Harry was safe though, as it was at least a part of his responsibilities as an Order member. In fact, Harry was probably safer than the rest of the Order members, but he couldn't let on about that. His answer would be a difficult one. While composing it mentally in his head, Remus drained the remains of his tea, and pored himself another cup.

Finally Remus put down his cup, and popped a lemon drop into his mouth. He hoped the sour look on his face would partially disguise the division of loyalty he was experiencing. No matter who he sided with, someone would feel betrayed.

"Professor, I'm sorry, but I can't help you as you wish." Dumbledore's face fell.

"Harry's trust has been broken. The trust he had with you, and with the other Order members as well. He didn't say, but I'm not even sure that he fully trusts Ron and Hermione anymore. And while I do see the reasons that you took the actions you did last night and in the past, I can't fault Harry for wanting to get away for the summer."

"Still, his safety remains my top concern, and I promise that he's as safe as can be. I'll continue to have contact with him for the rest of the summer, but I can't promise that I can tell you anything about what he's up to. I hope the conflict of interests that the Order has doesn't interfere with this, but if it does, than my decision is already made. I'll drop out if it means protecting Harry."

"I still don't think you realize the gravity of what you have done. If I too betray Harry's trust, it won't matter if he's physically safe or not. Emotionally he's already been mistreated more than one deserves. Merlin knows he loves being a wizard, but I wouldn't put it past him to leave England and go live among muggles if he's continued to not be given choices about his own future. In fact, I'd bet he's already thought of it."

Dumbledore's head snapped up at Remus's warning. Live among muggles? "Remus, I think you exaggerate. Harry is a wizard, and I only take these precautions to ensure his safety."

Remus however shook his head. "I'm sorry headmaster, but I don't exaggerate. I don't know if I completely agree, but I can see where he's coming from. In Harry's opinion, it's better to live even as a muggle, than to live no life at all. Right now you'd have Harry going to school most of the year, and then locked in a house the rest of the time. He'd be given limited contact with the few friends he does have, and be unable to make new friends because of his fame. It sounds to me that you're the one exaggerating what you claim to be his normal life, with only a few limitations. To me, it sounds like a lonely existence. And coming from a werewolf, that's saying a lot."

"So I'm sorry, but I can't tell you anything about my day with Harry except that he's fine. We talked about you and the others briefly, and you can at least take comfort in the fact that he doesn't hate you as so many of the members thought. He just doesn't trust you anymore. He said that you have a long way to go to regain that trust, but he's willing to try on his end. For my part, I'll try to convince Harry when we meet to let others know about his whereabouts and what he's been up to this summer." Remus cracked a sly grin. "I don't think it would hurt to let you know that Harry's accomplished some truly

remarkable things so far, and he still has three weeks left in the summer.”

Dumbledore smiled back, for the first time since their meeting had begun. “Yes, I imagine he has. Very well, then. Seeing as I have no choice in the matter, I’ll not push you further. I agree that it’s better for one able wizard to know Harry’s location and be able to protect him then none at all. However, I hope you understand Remus that I shall not give up searching for Harry, and that I might not be able to tell you everything about what all Order members are assigned to. It’s obvious you’re loyal to Harry and me both, but Harry doesn’t need to know everything that goes on here. I’m afraid this is all going to put a large strain on you.”

“Sir,” Remus promised, “you have my word that I won’t discuss Order business with Harry. Just as I won’t discuss his actions with you. But if he asks me a question having to do with him, and I know the answer, than I’ll tell him that. I won’t lie, it’s the least he deserves, even if it means telling Harry something that you might not want him to know. For what it’s worth, I think Harry’s a more capable and understanding person than you give him credit for. From just spending one day with him, I already know that he can be trusted with almost anything. I hope that I get the chance to prove that to you this school year.”

“So do I Remus, so do I.”

The two wizards switched back to small talk, and Remus was entertained with stories on how the three spies had reacted when he and Harry had escaped from the park meeting place. Moody had been impressed more than anything, Tonks was surprised and found the situation hilarious, and Snape was angry at them both. He thought it was Remus who had brought the portkey, until Dumbledore told him that he wasn’t capable of it.

Remus also heard about the large sum of money transferred into the Weasley’s vault, which he had some knowledge of. He admitted that Harry had told him about the gift, but said nothing about Harry discovering the safeguards set up to track his funds. Dumbledore likewise didn’t ask anything further about Harry’s trip to Gringotts. He

either respected Remus's decision to remain quiet about what Harry told him, or he thought his safeguards remained intact and unfound.

Because of the whole "so long, sucker" comment, Dumbledore suggested that Remus avoid Snape as much as possible the next few days, especially until the next Order meeting when Dumbledore could give a report on Lupin's findings. It was agreed that Remus wouldn't be present as he would undoubtedly be peppered with unanswerable questions by the various members. Only once the Order had sufficiently calmed down, and Molly Weasley been put to ease, would Remus rejoin the regular meetings.

An hour and a half after he entered, Remus Lupin left the circular office and made his way to Grimmauld Place. He was supposed to be avoiding it, but wanted to give the Weasely's a quick confirmation that Harry was indeed alright. Besides, he had a few personal things to pick up. As he walked down the changing hallways and staircases of Hogwarts castle, Remus wondered what Dumbledore and the others could possibly imagine Harry had been up to. Where do they think he was living? What do they think he was doing with his time? Remus laughed out loud, even when Peeves dropped ink pellets on him, at the thought. No matter what they suspected, it couldn't be further from the truth.

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The remainder of the summer flew by for Harry; what with his intense training schedule and all. Just like the month before his birthday, he completed all the tasks he had set out to learn, plus a few he didn't count on. In fact he hardly left his Hideaway at all, and only a few times ran in to other people. The apartment building did finally open up, and Harry tried to keep away from the other tenants as much as possible. The few times that he called the elevator to the thirteenth floor, and other people were in it, he simply obliterated them to think he had gotten on at a different stop. No one ever suspected the truth.

His mastery of Occlumency was now complete, as he had finished reorganizing his mind. His nightly meditation sessions were cut much shorter as Harry had stopped identifying new memories, and the

routine of sifting through the day's actions was becoming a familiar process. Harry guessed that once he returned to Hogwarts the time would increase again, but that was to be expected. There was a large difference between the life of a teenage boy away at boarding school, and that of a self exiled man who did nothing but read and practice all day long.

Defensively, Harry judged himself to be capable of outlasting a duel with up to three attackers; perhaps even more. That's not to say he could beat all three, but at least he could defend himself from them. It amazed him how far he had come from the simple shield spell he had learned only the year before. Now Harry knew a multitude of more complex shields, his speed and dexterity had increased from the physical exercise he had endured, and Harry even had limited success using transfiguration in fights. He could summon objects in the way of a curse, or even animate a small object to protect him, but only with immense concentration. The down side was that he was still unable to cast his own offensive spells while using transfiguration. It simply took too much concentration to do both.

The most interesting defensive skill however was the wand binding spells he had discovered, which Harry had never heard of before. Apparently they weren't taught at Hogwarts, but in the old tomes and texts he found among his family vault, Harry came across a series of books that listed a number of spells referred to as "Diffusements" that could be used to block a wand's performance. For instance, if Harry successfully cast a Diffuse Disarming spell, an opponent's wand would be unable to cast Expelliarmus for a short period of time. Of course it was impossible for Harry to learn every Diffuse spell listed, and not all spells could be successfully prevented, but he had acquired the ones he deemed most important. By the end of summer, Harry was able to successfully prevent an enemy from casting a disarming spell, a stunning spell, a leg locking curse, a severing charm, a body bind, the impedimenta jinx, and a summoning charm.

Offensively, Harry had mostly concentrated on honing his attacking abilities. He still hadn't learned very many new spells and curses, but he had a few tricks up his sleeve. Instead he concentrated on improving and learning new ways to use common and well-known spells more effectively in fights. Harry practiced shooting curse from

all types of positions, at all types of angles, and during all types of circumstances. He even practiced casting spells with his left hand just in case something happened to his right. The spells weren't nearly as strong or effective, but Harry had at least gotten his aiming right. In a worse case scenario, he wouldn't be totally buggered if his right arm was injured.

More than just studying offensive spells, Harry also studied strategy. Some of the texts he bought outlined basic auror attack formations, and explained about the advantages and disadvantages of each. It almost surprised Harry that they published the information, as dark wizards could easily look through the same books he was. If that were so, than dark wizards would have the advantage, because their own attack patterns weren't well known. At least, Harry assumed so. He himself spent most of the time studying strategy, concentrating on the actions of Death Eaters. And how he was able to do so came as a complete accident.

It was all in his pensieve, actually. When Harry finally brought out the green marble basin after finishing his training sessions early one day, he never expected to find the memories of a Death Eater. It was pure luck he even took the time to look through the memories at all. Harry's original intention was to dump the silvery liquid stuff down the drain, and start depositing his own thoughts straight away. But a quick consideration about the thought strands floating around in the muggle sewer system prevented him from doing that, so Harry took a dive into E.R.'s memories for a quick peek. What he found enthralled him.

The whole pensieve, each and every one of the many memory strands, was of Death Eater attacks. Sometimes they were against helpless wizard families, sometimes they were fighting aurors and the elite hit wizards. Most of the time the group was a small number of dark wizards, but a few times they numbered more than twenty. The only man who was common to all the memories, the man who was obviously E.R., was unfamiliar to Harry, at least at first. But after spending five one hour sessions in the pensieve, Harry finally figured out who E.R. was.

It was Evan Rosier, a Death Eater long ago killed by aurors. Not before he had cut a chunk out of Mad-Eye Moody's nose though, which was how Harry finally pieced together all the information he'd seen. Rosier must have kept all his memories dealing with Death Eater attacks in the pensieve, perhaps to keep the information safe against Occlumens and truth serums. But then he had gone and died in an attack, and the pensieve was left behind. Harry figured that a family member got rid of the thing, either by selling it or throwing it out, without even realizing the damaging evidence it held.

At first the memories sickened him, as they were just as detailed and disturbing as the vivid visions Harry had been plagued with since Voldemort's return. But he couldn't turn away. It was like looking at a car accident. No matter how gruesome or appalling, Harry had to not only watch, but study each Death Eater attack recorded in the green stone bowl. From the pensieve, he learned the tactics Death Eaters used most often, and their favorite spells as well. Not surprisingly, the Cruciatus was a personal favorite among many.

And that proved to be another huge part of Harry's training schedule; attempting to overcome the Cruciatus. According to the whole wizarding world, it was impossible to block or shield against. But in a rare first edition text, Harry discovered that the Cruciatus was related distantly to the tickling charm; Ricusempra. Both spells effected nerve endings in the body, only each stimulated a completely different sensation. One caused an extreme amount of pain, the other pleasure. The book went on further to speculate that the curses could be mentally overcome with enough practice, but very few wizards were willing to go through the paces to achieve the desired results. Harry decided that he would be one of the few.

So for each day the second half of summer, for an hour in the afternoon right before he ate dinner, Harry and his doppelgangers did nothing but curse each other and try to block out the false sensations. At first he only used the tickling charm, until he was satisfactory able to ignore the charm long enough to cast a spell of his own. The feeling never went completely away, but Harry was able to mentally dull the sensation to a mild itch. Once he retaliated by disarming his attacker, or using something else more creative, the Riscusempra

spell would be broken and end completely. That took almost three weeks.

The first day Harry tried the same process using Crucio, it was back to square one. It hurt like a bitch! Theoretically the same concentration techniques should have worked, but Harry discovered the big difference between theory and reality. In reality, the Crucio hurt just as much as he remembered. Telling his brain that the pain wasn't really there; that it was only an illusion of real pain didn't seem to help any. Even by holding the curse for only a few seconds at the most, Harry constantly fell to the ground. Once he even lost consciousness, as he had cursed himself more than five times within an hour.

It was lucky that Harry had practiced making a potion to counter the effects of the Cruciatus, otherwise he never would have survived. The mustard colored potion he had once seen Burkes drink in Knockturn Alley wasn't as sweet as the red potion he had taken himself, but it was very effective. Five minutes after drinking the potion, the only lasting side effects would be dull aching and dryness of the mouth. The down side was that the potion couldn't be taken with any others, but that didn't bother Harry. It might be a problem for Madame Pomfrey who had to administer multiple potions to injured patients, but Harry was only training. He currently wasn't taking any regular potions.

By the time August ended, Harry made only slight progress in working with the Cruciatus. It wasn't called an unforgivable for nothing! Still, it was a favorite of Death Eaters everywhere and Voldemort himself, so Harry vowed to keep at the practice. He had so far managed to twice fight through the pain and cast a spell of his own, but both times took an extreme amount of energy and mental fortitude. But it proved that the curse could be fought using sheer willpower, which was something that Harry had in spades.

His magical tattoos hadn't shown any progress in revealing their magical properties, and Harry was starting to question if he had been ripped off. The few times he took to stop what he was doing, and stare at his back in the mirror, the three small marks only moved a few inches at most, and rarely at that. They still remained a puzzle.

As did the whole golden patronus issue. As Remus suggested, Harry practiced conjuring a patronus at odd intervals, and was never able to reproduce the results he had shown the night they captured Wormtail. His patronus was certainly larger than he remembered, and it did sometimes look like it had gold tints to the mostly silver color, but it never approached the solid gold animal he had summoned to kill the Dementors. If he had more time Harry would have experimented more with the spell, but again, it wasn't a priority. Besides, Harry thought the new development was probably caused by being used in a real situation; in the presence of Dementors. He figured if caught in the same type circumstance, he'd once again see the golden form of Prongs.

Speaking of Remus, he did keep in touch regularly with Harry. The two had dinner several times together, and spent one Sunday afternoon showing the elves how to work the telly in the muggle room. Contrary to Harry's guess, it was Winky and not Dobby who became addicted to the thing. She particularly liked watching cooking programs, and especially liked Graham Kerr. She giggled at the way he didn't seem to know what he was doing, but yet all his dishes came out right in the end. Harry was glad that the three people he shared his home with, at least in some manner, were all getting along and enjoying themselves.

Remus had spent the night twice, but did pass up the spare room when the full moon came around. He admitted he felt more comfortable locked away in his own room at home, and would only use Harry's offered space in dire emergency. But the empty room behind the laundry was fixed up by the house-elves to be able to resist the strength of a werewolf, so the room was ready if ever needed.

The only bad thing about the whole second half of summer was Harry's daily trips to visit Wormtail. He could have had the elves feed him, but didn't want to shed the responsibility. Besides, they would have to take care of him once he returned to school.

Wormtail had screamed and cried the first few days, never knowing if someone heard his pleas through the seemingly solid walls that held

him in. His food, usually a sandwich or some cold chicken with only water to drink, would magically appear on his plate twice a day, and his waste would magically disappear each evening. Harry thought about trying to interrogate Wormtail, to see what he knew of Voldemort's plans, but knew it wasn't necessary. His visions, especially the third and last one, told him enough to know that Wormtail was never told anything of importance.

The vision Harry had, three nights after capturing Wormtail and destroying the Dementors, was a short and particularly angry one. Voldemort was enraged that the servants he had sent out to find Wormtail were unable to locate him. Voldemort believed that Wormtail ran away, and was hiding in his animagus form as he did for so many years with the Weasleys. He didn't even notice that he must have been missing five Dementors as well, but they admittedly are almost identical in appearance.

The rest of Harry's training followed suit. The practice using his dagger, the wrestling and sparing he did with his doubles, the Potions and Arithmancy work he continued; all of it.

His transfiguration skills got a little better as well. Harry was able to transfigure mostly anything into normal objects. Non common materials and large animal transfigurations still gave him trouble. To keep his promise to Hedwig about making her a jewel-studded perch, he also practiced crafting fine detail into objects. He used a few of the jewels he took from his family vault to further decorate her posh perch, and Hedwig hooted an approval. Or actually, it was more of a chirp.

Only two days before the end of August, Hedwig experienced her first burning day. At first Harry was nervous that something would go wrong. He still didn't know how it was possible that his snowy owl became a white phoenix, and Harry wondered if he'd ever know for sure. The only other person he knew who might have answers was Dumbledore, but those questions would have to wait. Dumbledore didn't even know about Hedwig yet, and Harry was still uncomfortable asking the headmaster for favors when he kept himself so guarded against the man. Maybe later.

The burning however went exactly as Harry had witnessed before with Fawkes, and a little shriveled up Hedwig popped her head out of a pile of ashes. In the two days before he left for Hogwarts, Hedwig only grew a little, and still lacked most of her feathers. She wouldn't be able to make the trip by air, and Harry certainly wasn't willing to carry her on the train with him. That was asking for trouble. If the student population found out that a live phoenix was riding on the train, with Harry Potter no less, pandemonium would break out. He'd have to find another way of getting Hedwig to Hogwarts.

The other transfiguration talent that Harry touched on briefly was his animagus training. There wasn't one definite way to go about finding one's inner animal, but Harry meditated a number of suggested ways to begin the process. So far he hadn't discovered what his animal form would be, but knew the rough size. He figured he'd be a little smaller than his father's stag form. It wasn't until after a wizard visualized their animal form that they could begin the next step of actually transforming, and Harry wasn't even close to that yet. He seemed to hit a block in his meditation, and couldn't get an animal form to visualize. Maybe once he dedicated more time to training he'd be more successful, but again, the animagus ability wasn't a priority. Sure it would be cool, but with a form that size, it wouldn't be good for spying or stealthy escapes. Harry thought it more important to learn about strategy and offensive spells than how to romp in the Forbidden Forrest as an animal.

Finally the morning of September first dawned in Harry's bedroom, the sun shinning full through the eastern facing windows. Harry woke and had breakfast like normal, and even went through his regular training session. While he showered for the last time in his luxury bath, Dobby and Winky packed his magical trunk almost exactly the way it had been when he had first bought it. All his clothes went in the first compartment, his school supplies and broomstick in the second, and most of his books in the small library in the third. The only books he left behind were ones he no longer needed; the ones he had practically memorized.

Hedwig's perch was left out because she still had use for it, as she wouldn't be joining Harry at school until she had regrown most of her feathers and could fly again. Dobby and Winky likewise left all their

possessions in their room, as they too would be staying behind at the Hideaway. Harry did tell them he would have work for them to do both at school and at home, but wanted to settle at Hogwarts before giving them their orders.

It was ten past ten in the morning when Harry shrunk his trunk down to size, and left to say goodbye to the house-elves. Now fully dressed with his one piece of luggage shrunk down to size in his pocket, Harry took a last look around what had been his home the past two months, and made sure all the locks and windows were securely fastened. Then he disapparated with a small pop to platform nine and three quarters.

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AUTHOR NOTES:

Sorry this update took longer than I expected, but some things came up that I had to take care of. Still, I don't think the wait was too long, with this being my longest time between updates, still less than 2 weeks. I've read authors who update only once every 3 months, and I know how frustrating that can be. I know this chapter seems a little slow, especially compared to last chapter, but it was necessary to end the summer. Finally, Harry goes back to school, and I get to play with more than one or two characters per chapter. So far, I'm having a lot of fun writing Malfoy, and I can't wait to read some of your responses to what I've put down. Also, as you all know from reading my other AN at the beginning of the chapter, the "First Blood, Part II" title came from a movie. Who can guess which movie this chapter's title came from? I'm guessing all the ladies will know it. And please read my updated bio page, as I now have a picture of Harry's Hideaway posted thanks to HermioneGreen. Later, and thanks for reading.

Linzee Potter – About Harry's power as a wizard. Yes, he's more powerful than an average wizard. Plus, he's been studying the whole summer (9 weeks x 3 = over 6 months), so it makes sense that he knows some advanced magic. Remember that he's purposely studying advanced spells. I admit that the Dementor thing seems a bit

much, but I plan on explaining that later in the story. As I've said before, remember that Harry has at least one power that "Voldemort knows not of." And remember that his new wand (from Hedwig) is powerful too. The wand itself doesn't provide magical power, but it had a tight focus that better directs Harry's own powers.

Lauren – There's not much you mentioned in your last review that I haven't already answered about, but there is one thing. No, I don't plan on introducing souls of familiar characters in the story. The only person we know of who's been kissed by a Dementor is Barty Crouch Jr., and in the last chapter I explained that all dark wizard souls were destroyed in the five Dementors Harry killed. Still, I think the plot point provides excellent opportunity to introduce surprising twists. We'll have to see where the story takes me. And congrats, you finally get to know who "E.R." is. Did you figure it out? It was easy, really. In the whole HP Lexicon (which I use to back up facts in my story) there's only one person with those initials. Hope the answer satisfied you insatiable curiosity.

Abajab – Not Voldy's mum, but that's an interesting guess. Not too many fanfics investigate Voldy's family life, and that would be interesting to look into. And most of the fics that do I find totally unrealistic. It's amazing how once you discount slash, evil-Harry, Severitus challenge, and poorly written stories, how actual little there is out there to read. Thanks.

Mirinaya – Sorry, but Sirius is staying dead in this story. I agree that I would love to see him alive, but it's not meant to be. And since I'm staying with cannon, he's can't come back alive. So no corner flat for him. I do have plans for it though, and so far no one has guessed who the future occupant(s) are. Care to take a gamble?

Bill – You bring up a good point about Dumbledore knowing about Sirius, but it's not what I intended. So for argument's sake, let's say that Dumble did all the rune writing and research, and the secret keeper was the one to activate the spell (the forehead runes). That way Dumbledore still could have done the majority of the work, but not have known who the keeper was. Good catch on my blunder though.

HPFanFicLuvr – You made my point exactly about building a strong base for the story by having a lengthy summer. And actually, after chapter 3 or 4, I even lengthened the summer by 3 chapters to build a stronger base than I originally planned. I've already planned out a sequel to my story, so now I'm building for two. Thanks for the compliments.

Jac – I don't have anything personal against Dumbledore, I just think his character is too perfectly written by JKR. Nobody is that good. So I've trashed Dumble a little, so he doesn't appear god-like. Eventually he and Harry will reconcile, but it will take some time. Stories that have the two fight, than make up a day later aren't believable. I'm trying to be as honest as possible, and the truth is that Dumble really screwed Harry.

AA – I'm trying so hard to stay away from super powers, but finding a balance is difficult. In my defense, Harry only cast three strong spells in the battle scene. Patronus he mastered at an early age, and I plan on explaining the whole golded patronus thing. Impedimenta is likewise a spell he's known for many years, and one which he used his new wand with. The final spell, which melted Wormtail's hand was one he studied especially for that circumstance, and was done in a controlled environment. Wormtail was frozen at the time, and the spell took a long time to eat through the whole hand. With the 6 months of intense training he's had, I don't see any one of these spells out of Harry's reach. I hope you agree.

Whizzy & George – Thank you and fck you for telling me that Katie Bell is still in school. J/K. I'm not angry, it just throws my plot off the path I had chosen. I've been heavily relying on the HP lexicon for accurate info, and I guess it's finally failed me. I haven't decided what to do yet, I might have Katie back at school or not. I don't know. But when I decide, I'm sure you'll be one of the first to recognize it. Thanks again for letting me know, as I could have really dug myself into a hole without knowing it.

Luke Potter – Voldy or Dumbledore's long lost granddaughter? Sorry, but Harry couldn't possible hook up with any such people in my story as they don't exist. I find it next to impossible that JKR would introduce such important characters so late in the series. Now, I think

it would be much more realistic if certain characters were revealed to be related to Voldy/Dumble, but I don't think that's likely either. And as for H/G and H/Hr pairings being overused and unoriginal, well, sure they are. They're overused because they are the most likely to happen. Writing a good fanfic is about being as creative as possible while still living in the guidelines the original author has set down. So my story will have slight H/G involvement, as I've said in my summary. Sorry if you don't like it, but I can't imagine something else. While the ideas of Harry/Tonks & Harry/OC are fun to explore, I haven't yet read a realistic one.

InnerInferno – Thanks, and you're right. Read the message above this one. No two wands for Harry though. Besides being supposedly impossible, I imagine it to be too confusing to be able to learn properly. And yes, you're right about the time tuner. It can travel one week back in time, while Hermione's time turner is the one that only allows a few hours travel. Remember that the tuner is a DoM secret, so not many know about it.

Lilywolf – Believe me, nobody realizes the length of my story more than I. I don't doubt it will be one of the longest fics on , (I guess 350,000 words) but it is what it is. I could easily publish it in parts and call them sequels, but I decided to do it in one story instead. When I read fics, I purposely look for the long ones. I hop others do the same, and come across mine. Thanks.

Calimora – Thanks for your review, it's one of the best I've gotten. It praises my work, tells me what was liked, and provides constructive criticism for me to improve upon. I agree I got too detailed with the clothes shopping and the house building, but I got carried away. I actually wrote the first many chapters at one sitting, so that's why all the shopping scenes are so detailed. Hopefully you've seen an improvement with the last 2 chapters. I'm trying, but like I always say, I have very little writing experience. As for the cords, what can I say? I'm a closet hippie, who loves all the things I've added to Harry's character. I wear cords and Birkenstocks, I have a love for fine foods and wine, and I really do buy expensive white tea to drink (\$4/oz.) I myself have five pairs of corduroys. Thanks for reviewing.

Comos12 – Harry hasn't furnished his new home with furniture/paintings he found in his vault because it's all old ancestral stuff. I wanted Harry to have a bunch of comfortable and simple looking stuff instead. But he still has access to it all, and a second home might be in his future. Another review once asked if Harry would ever find out if the original Potter Mansion was destroyed. We'll see....but I can imagine the furniture would be more at home there.

Mikito – Harry is only taking 5 classes for a reason, one which I'll explain eventually. D.A. will be renamed; after all, it wasn't always Dumbledore's Army. Wormtail won't be Obliviated b/c Harry doesn't want to chance messing with his mind. He's the only one who can prove Sirius's innocence. And lastly, this by no means will be a romance story. It will however have H/G undertones, but nothing approaching a full blown romance. They're only 15 after all!

I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving 50 reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

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Updated 8/8/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected al that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 12 – Throw Draco from the Train

The morning of September first was always a busy one for the Weasleys', and this year was no exception. Even with only two children going to school this year, things had still gone berserk in their own unique way.

Ron had overslept because he'd been up late the night before, eagerly awaiting getting back to school. The past few weeks hadn't been great for him; ever since his parents found out about him being demoted as a prefect. That shock had come as much of a surprise to him as it had his parents, and Ron still wanted to know why he was kicked out. Sure he had only gotten five OWL's, but that had been better than both the twins, and only three shy of Charlie. It's because of the shock he felt that he didn't tell his parents right away. Sure he was embarrassed; but he couldn't explain why it had happened. Too bad the reason didn't matter much to his mother.

She had been outraged when she found out from McGonagall, and had given it to Ron with both barrels right after the afternoon Order meeting. He'd been reamed out before, both in person and by use of Howlers, but nothing had been as bad as that night. The whole house had heard his mother's yelling, including some of the Order members who had stayed behind afterwards. Ron at least thanked Merlin that Snape wasn't around, as he didn't think he could handle his most hated professor gloating at him. Stupid git!

Besides not being allowed dinner that night, Ron's summer only took a turn for the worse. Everyday for the following three weeks he was forced to clear out doxies and other pesky critters from some of the lesser used rooms. In that time, he'd come across countless doxies, two boggarts, a few stray pixies, and one creature which he couldn't even identify. That one had left a nasty bite mark on his hand before escaping through an open window.

He'd also been forced to do homework in each of the six subjects he had gotten OWL's in, even though homework wasn't assigned by the teachers. Because it wasn't known to students which classes they would receive passing marks in, the summer after fifth year was the

only one homework free for all students. Except for Ron that is. His mother had given him her own assignments, and was humiliated when she asked Ginny to look it over for her when he finished. Having his papers graded by his baby sister was a new low, even for Ron. Ginny didn't mind though, as grading his papers gave her a leg up on her own studies.

Thankfully it was now over though, and Ron ran downstairs after waking up forty minutes late. Mercifully breakfast was still laid out, and Ron had taken the unusual action of packing his trunk the night before. Once he finished clearing his plates, he and Ginny joined their mother and father in the front hall of Grimmauld Place, and set out on foot for King's Cross Station. He couldn't wait to see Harry.

Ginny likewise couldn't wait to board the Hogwart's Express, but for different reasons. She was excited because for the first time, she'd had a wonderful summer, even if it had been filled with a little unwanted worry.

Her summer studies couldn't have gone better, and the extra help she gave Ron had prepared her well beyond fifth year class levels. Ginny had also kept a regular correspondence with some friends this summer, mostly with Luna Lovegood and Dean Thomas. Luna because she was the same age, and both were outsiders in their own dorms. Luna was outcast because she was "Loony," and Ginny because of her first year. She didn't really blame her dorm mates, but ever since the whole Tom Riddle diary thing, they had kept their distance. They were friendly towards her and everything, but the close friendship the others had forged that first year had passed by, and she had never been able to make up for it. Ginny guessed that's why she spent most of her time either with Ron and his friends, or with students in other houses and years.

Dean Thomas on the other hand was a different story. The two had talked a few times in the first four years she had attended Hogwarts, but last year being in the D.A., the two had become closer. Not in a romantic way though; just as good friends. She had only told Ron the year before that they had been going out to make him upset, and boy had it worked! The whole summer Ginny counted the number of times her brother muttered something about beating Dean up, and she

thought it hilarious. Dean didn't think the same when reading her letters, but promised to go along with the farce. He promised that as long as Ron didn't pummel him at first sight, he'd keep up the pretence of being Ginny's boyfriend.

Once Ron had shown himself and ate a quick breakfast (not that Ron ever took his time), Ginny gathered her things by the front door and prepared to leave. Only her parents decided to escort her and Ron this year to the train station, as her older brothers were all at work; even Fred and George. Surprising their mother the most, since they prematurely left school the year before the two had been dedicated to mass production and distribution of their Wheezes. The store they briefly rented in Diagon Alley had seemed a success, and the twins had even bought some hideous new clothes to show their good fortune. When it closed down they said it was due to an underestimation of running a new business, but the two had hopes to soon reopen the store, perhaps as early as next summer. For now they worked out of the Burrow, selling their wares by owl catalogue.

The walk to the station went quicker than last year, as they didn't have to worry about extra protection and security. Not having countless Order members watch your every move was one of the few good things about not having Harry around this summer.

'Boy,' thought Ginny, 'he's really going to get it from Mum!' As Ginny and her family entered the busy train terminal and headed for the blank wall between platforms nine and ten, Ginny reminisced about her mother's antics over the past few weeks. Ever since discovering the money and note from Harry in their family vault, her mother had been on a whirlwind of emotions. It wasn't uncommon for her to cry for hours on end, and then moments later be in a great mood and cook up a meal fit enough to outdo the Hogwart's house-elves. Ginny was happy for her parents, even if they did feel uncomfortable about taking the money. Ginny didn't know how much it had been, but she had seen the piles. It was certainly more than she'd ever seen before. And aside from a few new clothes for the whole family, and new textbooks and school supplies as well, Ginny figured the money to mostly still be there. She had no doubt that after a bone-crushing hug, her mum would try to give it all back to Harry the moment she saw him. She knew it wouldn't happen though. She had read Harry's letter.

She had actually sneaked it out of her mother's grasp on the cart ride back to Gringott's lobby, and read it quickly before they arrived. It had floored her! Sure, Ginny knew Harry to be a great guy and one of the most decent fellows she knew, but she never imagined he possessed the thought and conviction he poured into that letter. He must have wanted to do this for some time. It was a good thing only she and the twins had gone with their mother that day. Ron was grounded because of the whole prefect thing, and he still hadn't been told about the money. Her parents made her and the twins promise not to tell anyone until they decided what to do with it. Ron did raise a few questions about why they were buying brand new clothes and school books, but didn't press the matter because of his strained relationship with his family. Ron was in enough trouble as it was.

Once across the magical barrier, a bushy-haired blur crashed into her giving a great hug. Hermione!

"Oh Ginny, it's wonderful to see you. How was your summer?"

Ginny laughed as she pried Hermione's arms away. "Great Hermione. I got a lot of work done, and I'm really looking forward to this year. How about you? How was the trip?"

"It was fantastic! Mum and Dad took me to see all the muggle sights, and we even went to a few wizarding places as well. I found the greatest little bookstore in Amsterdam, which specializes in rare first edition texts, and I stayed until closing that day. And guess what? I got thirteen OWL's! The one in Transfiguration was a perfect score! I can't wait to find out how everyone else did."

Ginny was pleased for her friend; she just hoped Ron wouldn't be too upset at hearing Hermione's high marks. He still hadn't come over to say hi, and was nervously shuffling his feet by the baggage cart a few feet away.

Hermione hadn't noticed him there yet, and looked around behind Ginny.

"Speaking of everyone else, where are Harry and Ron?

Answering for himself, Ron came over from where he had been pseudo-hiding and greeted her uneasily.

"Hey Hermione. How's it going?" Ron didn't know whether to hug Hermione or not, and she looked like she suffered from the same indecision, so the two settled on an awkward handshake after a long moment.

"Great Ron. I was just telling Ginny how much fun I had during break. But I'm glad to be back; I missed everybody so. Where's Harry? Doesn't he normally come to the station with you?"

Ron nodded in affirmation. Harry did normally travel with the Weasleys, but hadn't this year. "Harry hasn't shown up yet. I haven't talked to him in a while, and he never came to stay at headquarters like he was supposed to. From what mum and Remus say he hasn't even been staying with the Dursleys this summer. I don't know where he is, or how he's getting to school this year."

Upon hearing the answer to her question, Hermione's eyes went wide with worry, and she nervously began questioning Ron about what he knew. She thought for sure that Harry was in trouble, and started to blame herself for going off on a trip to have fun while one of her friends was left behind in mortal coil.

Luckily Ron was able to interrupt Hermione before she got a full load of steam going. "Relax Hermione; Harry's fine. Mum won't say much, and I can tell she's been worried, but Remus has been in touch with him and has even visited a few times. I haven't heard back from him since his birthday, but my guess is that Dumbledore moved Harry someplace safe, and didn't tell too many people about it. Probably a security thing, ya know? I can't wait for Harry to tell us all about it!"

Ron explanation calmed Hermione, and the two began to look around together for the third part of their trio. Ginny felt she needed to leave the two alone, and politely made her exit.

"I'll leave to two to catch up with Harry then," she said. "I'll go and get a compartment on the train before the prefect meeting starts. Otherwise we might end up sitting with a bunch of Slytherins."

"Oh Ginny," Hermione congratulated her, "you made prefect! Well done. Now all three of us can go to meetings and patrol together. It's a shame Harry will be left alone during all that time, but oh well. Maybe he'll take the extra time out to study for his classes. He did write that he was going to take school more seriously this year. I do hope so."

The whole time Hermione was speaking about prefect meetings, Ron had been squirming. It was obvious he was nervous about telling Hermione he wasn't a prefect any longer. So to help out her big brother, Ginny decided to lend a helping hand.

"Don't worry Hermione," Ginny said as she turned to the train and climbed the few steps. "I'm sure Harry won't be bored. Ron's no longer prefect, so I'm sure the two will find plenty to occupy themselves with. Bye!"

The last thing Ginny heard clearly before she closed the train doors behind her was a very angry Hermione with Ron failing to stand up for himself. She laughed.

The train was crowded as always, and most of the compartments were already filled to capacity. There was only ten minutes left before the train would depart, and Ginny was convinced she would have to intrude on a compartment already occupied. She passed a few with people she recognized in it, but none with enough room for herself, plus her three other friends. The best possibility she found was Lavender, Pavarti, and Padma in a compartment with Seamus and Dean, but it was already very crowded. Even while Hermione and she attended the initial prefect meeting, there wouldn't be enough room for everyone.

Fortunately, just like last year, the eccentricities of Luna Lovegood kept many of her fellow students away, and that one compartment was fairly empty. As she entered, she also noticed a more confidant looking Neville Longbottom, and another boy she didn't at first

recognize. After greeting two of the three in the compartment, Ginny turned to introduce herself to the third, but found she didn't need to.

"What," the third person said as he lifted his head from the Quibbler he must have borrowed from Luna, "no hello for me?" Ginny was blown away as she came to recognize the lopsided smile and bright green eyes. It was Harry!

"Harry! Wow, you look different." It was the truth too. Besides not having glasses anymore, and being a few inches taller than the year before, Harry had filled out a little as well. He wasn't overly bulky, and most wouldn't have even noticed, but Ginny had long ago made a habit of studying the Boy-Who-Lived. The half year of exercise had put almost twenty pounds of muscle on Harry, but only he knew that. He hoped everyone else would just assume that he finally had a growth spurt. His hair was longer also, falling around his face in wavy locks. The additional weight of the hair made it not stand on end in the back anymore, but it was still as messy as ever.

Harry smiled as he stood to give Ginny a hug. A few years ago neither of them would have been able to do so. But since the Department of Mysteries trip, both teenagers had been more comfortable around each other. Ginny realized her long time crush was just that; a crush on a very famous wizarding name. And Harry felt more comfortable without Ginny turning red and running from the room every time he showed his face. Humility had never been one of Harry's strong suites.

"Hey Ginny, ready for a new year? I for one hope it's better than last. Then again, that's kind of a given, isn't it?" Harry's smile turned a bit sad just for a second, and then he caught himself. "Where are Ron and Hermione? I thought for sure both of them would have accosted me the second they set foot on the train."

Ginny gave a quick grin. "They still might. Nobody knew how you were getting to the station, so I think they're both still on the platform looking for you. Mum and Dad are out there too. I think you might have to deal with Mum first before you even get a chance to speak to Ron or Hermione. Thanks by the way; it's a real nice thing you did."

Harry was surprised at Ginny's statement. "You know?" Ginny nodded, and Harry gulped. "I hope Ron took it OK? Please tell me he did?"

By now Luna and Neville were engaged in a private discussion in the two farthest seats by the window, and Ginny sat down by the door to explain to Harry. "Ron doesn't know about the money yet. Just me, Fred, and George know, and that's only because we saw it. Mum and Dad want to keep it a secret until they decide what to do. I'm not sure they'll keep it. In fact, I suggest you go out and talk to them right now. The train will leave soon, and there's not much time left."

Harry took a quick peak out the window and did spot the Weasleys and Hermione. The four of them all stood together, and made for an intimidating sight.

"Ahh, I think I'll stay on the train actually. Ron and Hermione will have to get on sooner or later, and I'll write your parents once we get to Hogwarts. I don't want to see them on the off chance they can convince me to take back the money. I'm sure a few motherly hugs and the guilt trip they'd give me would do it, and I really do want them to keep it all. I hope I don't get a Howler from your mum about not seeing her. Besides, the prefect meeting starts soon, and I have to find the right compartment. I missed the meeting last year, remember? How about you; make prefect?"

Ginny didn't agree with Harry avoiding her parents, but lost the thought as she heard Harry say he was prefect. Ron was not going to like this.

The two traded some more small talk, with Ginny explaining why Ron was no longer prefect. Harry felt bad for his friend, but there was nothing to do about it now. During the course of the summer Harry had come to believe that Ron had given up the position freely. After all, he never really did like the added responsibility. If he had known Ron was forced from the position, he never would have accepted it. Trust Dumbledore to not tell Harry the full truth. 'Does he even realize how much he's jeopardizing my friendship?' Harry thought.

Halfway through the small talk, Harry remembered to thank Ginny for the great birthday present, and Neville as well. The subscription to the Daily Prophet had actually worked out fine. Not wanting to reveal “Hedwig the Phoenix” to the wizarding population, Dobby agreed to pop over to the newspaper office every morning to retrieve the paper. Hedwig at first was upset about him intruding in her lifelong business, but warmed up to the idea after a few days of severe spoiling. Dobby and Winky cooked special treats for the upset bird, and she soon forgave them. And Hedwig now had a passion for apricot rolls. Nothing of interest had happened in the wizarding world pertaining to Death Eater attacks or Voldemort sightings, but Harry thought it nice to be able to keep up with the normal news.

Soon the ten minutes dwindled down, and the steam engine’s loud whistle gave a final warning. Ron and Hermione had waited till the last possible moment on the platform, and still hadn’t found Harry. They were worried of course, but took comfort in the fact that at least Harry had missed the train before. They thought that perhaps Dumbledore had arranged alternate transportation. With a last look around, they boarded the train and set off to find Ginny.

“Relax Hermione, I’m sure Harry’s fine. Maybe he took a portkey to school. Or maybe he’s been at Hogwarts all summer long. Yeah, I bet that’s it.”

Hermione wasn’t as easily convinced, but realized there was nothing she could do about it then. During the prefect meeting she planned to let the Head Girl and Boy know about Harry’s absence, and hoped they had a way to contact some of Hogwarts’ staff. Her worries were put to rest though as she opened the compartment door that Ginny’s had waved from. There were already three people in it, and she knew them all.

“Harry! What are you doing here? Why didn’t you come out to get us? I’ve been worried sick.” Hermione threw her arms around Harry even before he got a chance to stand up.

Ron was just as relieved to see Harry safe, but had to keep up his manly facade. There would be no hugs or tears coming from him.

"Harry, good to see you mate!" Ron slapped Harry on the back as he dragged in his and Hermione's trunks. They had been sitting in the hallway since the two had arrived at the platform. Ginny had taken Pig's cage earlier to relieve some of the burden. "Cor Harry, you look different. What've you been eating?"

Harry laughed at Ron's proclamation, and Hermione broke her death lock to take a closer look at him.

"You have changed. Where are your glasses? And you need a haircut; you're hair's a mess. I could get Pavarti or Lavender to give you a trim before the feast if you like."

Harry's eyes went wide at the threat. Weeks ago he had decided to grow his hair out instead of shaving it all off, and he'd worked hard in keeping the length. For some reason his hair grew a lot slower than he knew it should, but Harry guessed that was because it had trained itself to stay the same length for so long. After about the first two months of trying, he finally noticed some difference. Currently, his hair was in a state of limbo. Harry still couldn't pull his hair back into a ponytail, but it was long enough to get in his face. During the summer he'd taken to wearing a bandana to hold back his hair, and Harry hoped that Hogwarts would allow him to continue. At least for Quidditch, so he could see properly.

"Not on your life Hermione," he answered. "Those two would end up braiding my hair, or putting in bows. I think I'll keep my hair just as it is, thank you. And I got contacts, so I don't wear glasses anymore. What do you think?" Harry for the moment left out the part about them being magical lenses.

The train started its long trip north as the six friends settled in for the journey. Neville and Luna joined in the conversation now that the compartment was full, and they traded quick summaries of their summers. Luna had vacationed in Scandinavia with her father looking for a supposedly extinct species of Glumbumbles, and Neville had made the usual trips to St. Mungo's to visit his parents. He did have a choice few words about his new wand though. Harry just grinned.

Rona and Ginny both admitted to practicing Quidditch the first half of summer, than mainly concentrating on homework the second half. Neville and Luna didn't know about Grimmauld Place so they couldn't be specific, but Harry got the idea that they had been cooped up for the most part. He did wonder what Ron having homework was all about, but wisely said nothing.

Hermione gave a brief rundown of her trip, naming all the countries and museums she had visited. She admitted to going to Bulgaria for three days, but said nothing about visiting Victor Krum. Ron's face turned red at that. Even though it was obvious he wanted to ask questions, he kept his mouth shut. When the five turned to Harry to hear what he had been up to, he just gave a very vague answer.

"Oh, I didn't go anywhere much; just stayed at home and studied." Harry smiled as his three closer friends all started to speak at once, yelling and screaming at each other and themselves. It was Ron who finally quieted the others so he could be heard. Plus, he was the loudest.

"What's the story Harry? No one's seen or heard from you for a month except Remus, and there have been odd Order meetings the whole summer. Fred and George weren't allowed to join, so we don't even know what's going on. Fess up; what gives?"

"OK, OK, I'll tell you," Harry gave in with a last chuckle. "But you all have to promise to not tell anyone else. No one except Remus knows what I've been up to this summer, and I want to keep it that way."

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville quickly agreed to keep quiet, and Luna did too once she snapped out of the trance-like state she had been in while reading the Quibbler upside down. Harry trusted them all, and had no reason to hide most of what he had been up to for the summer. Most of it. Some things, like the Dementor attack, he planned to keep to himself. At least for now; until he understood exactly what had happened. Harry didn't think he could handle Hermione's endless questions about an attack at her house, a golden patronus, and released wizard spirits. He took a deep breath and relaxed in his seat, about to begin his long story, when Ginny interrupted him.

"Harry, maybe this should wait until after the prefect meeting. It starts soon, and by the looks of things this story is going to take some time to explain."

She was right of course, and Harry agreed leaving the others looking a little discouraged at having to wait to hear the tale. Everyone except Ron that is. While the others stood up ready to leave for the meeting, he took a sandwich out of his robe pocket and bit into it eagerly.

"Well I'm sure Harry will tell me and Neville plenty while you lot are off at your meeting. Right Harry? You'll just have to tell them again when they get back."

Harry caught a concerned look on Ginny's face; a look which he thought might be on his own as well. This wasn't going to be easy.

"Actually Ron," he said, "I have to go to the meeting too. I'm prefect this year in your place. Dumbledore told me earlier this summer." Ron didn't say anything, but sunk down in his seat and took another bite in his sandwich.

"Oh Harry, that's terrific!" Hermione for one thought the news good. "It's a lot of responsibility though. This means you can't go getting into trouble like you usually do. I hope you're up to it."

Harry didn't hear a word Hermione said; he was still looking at Ron. "Ron, are you OK with this? I didn't know that you got dismissed as perfect; Dumbledore didn't tell me. In fact, I didn't find out until today. I thought you gave up the spot because you didn't want it anymore. Ron?"

Ron only took another bite into his sandwich, and chewed it slowly. Harry didn't know if he was angry or just plain hungry, when Luna stepped in. Thank Merlin for Ravenclaw logic.

"Of course Ronald's OK with you being prefect, Harry. After all, weren't you OK with him being one last year? The situation has simply reversed itself. If the two of you are friends, which you are, than this can't possibly be a problem. Isn't that correct Ronald?"

It took a second, but Ron slowly lifted his head to Harry and gave a weak smile. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “Congrats mate. I reckon’ you should’ve got it last year anyways.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded and was first to step out of the compartment. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna followed after him, and the four made their way slowly to the front of the train.

Harry turned back to Luna after they were far enough away to not be heard. “Thanks Luna, I think what you said helped. I expected him to get all huffy and jealous.”

“Don’t fret Harry,” she replied, “he just needs time to acclimate the knowledge. That’s the type of person Ronald is.”

A little while later the four reached the prefect compartment, and entered. It was much larger and more extravagant than any of the other compartments, and about half the school’s prefects were already there. The Head Boy and Girl, two students Harry didn’t know well from Slytherin and Hufflepuff respectively, had already taken a position at the podium.

“Potter!” The Head Boy yelled. Harry recalled his name was David Hoffstrum, but not much else. Coming from Slytherin, that was a good thing. If the boy had been friends with Malfoy or any other of the troublemakers in the house, Harry would have remembered. “I’ve been instructed to tell you to send an owl to Professor McGonagall once the meeting’s over with. She wanted to know if you showed up or not. Understand?”

“Yes.” Harry wasn’t surprised. She and Dumbledore must have been worried that he wouldn’t make the train. Harry had assured them that he would, but he couldn’t blame them for thinking otherwise. At least they hadn’t sent someone to intercept him at the train station.

“Harry,” Ginny asked from besides him, “what was that about?”

The three Gryffindors and single Ravenclaw took a seat next to each other on the window side of the compartment; waiting for the other

prefects to appear. "Don't worry about it," he replied, "but remind me to borrow Pig once we get back."

Hermione put in her two cents just then. "Where's Hedwig? I don't remember seeing her cage in the compartment. For that matter, I don't recall seeing your trunk either."

"Don't worry about it. I'll explain everything later. It all has to do with my summer. Anyways, the meeting's about to start."

And it was, because the last prefects just entered the room and sat in the last two remaining seats. Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson.

"Hermione!" Harry whispered loudly in her ears as the Head Boy and Girl called the meeting to order. "How can those two still be prefects after joining the Inquisitional Squad? What they did was so much worse than what Ron did!"

"Shushhh! I guess it's because even though their actions were despicable, they were taking direction from the school Headmaster at the time. Now quite! The meeting's begun."

The meeting was very boring in Harry's opinion. They quickly introduced the new prefects (including himself which earned a snicker from Malfoy) and went over the few changes to the prefect rulebook from the previous year. Harry had been sent a new rulebook with his school letter which he actually studied, so his version was up to date unlike Hermione's and the others.

The only other official business was setting up patrol schedules. Last year, with the rise of Voldemort, Dumbledore had set up nightly patrol routes for the prefects to follow. They had been stopped after he had been dismissed from school, but apparently they were now back in effect. All prefects were required to patrol twice a week between either the hours of 10:00 pm-12:00 am, or 12:00 am-2:00 am. After that, the teachers and ghosts would patrol the corridors.

As a group, the prefects decided to keep the same schedule from the year before, rather than waste time setting up a new one. All the new prefects would just take the place of the graduated ones. In Harry's

case, he had to take Ron's old schedule. He had been paired up with Alicia on Tuesday nights from 12:00-2:00, and with a Hufflepuff girl Sunday nights from 10:00-12:00. At Harry's questioning look, Hermione gave him the answers he wanted to know.

"All pairings have to be boy/girl, for safety's sake. I think it's a load of rubbish, but Dumbledore and McGonagall are a bit old fashioned. Chivalry and all that. If we find anything, the guy's supposed to stay with the problem, while the girl goes for help. Fat chance of that happening with Ginny, though! Ron wanted to pair up with me and her this year, but only so he could slack off during his watch. I refused, because I'm perfectly happy with my old partners. The few weeks of patrols we did have, Ron complained the whole time. If they had gone on for much longer, I think I would have even tried to get rid of him. Ask for a transfer or something."

'Makes sense,' thought Harry. That sounded just like Ron. He didn't know too many students in other houses, and would want to stick with people he knew. Privately, Harry was pleased at the arrangement. Ginny, who had to take Alicia's old schedule, would be fun to have around, and the fifth year Hufflepuff girl seemed nice enough. She and Harry agreed to meet in the library a day before their first patrol to get to know each other better. Harry was also glad he wasn't paired with Hermione. While she was one of his best friends; when it came to upholding the school rules she could be a little overenthusiastic. Harry planned to do a good job and all, but didn't see himself becoming fanatical like some others he knew. One of her partners, Terry Boot from Ravenclaw, was just like Hermione when it came to upstanding the school rules. Those two were perfectly suited to be perfect partners.

"One more thing before we adjourn," the Head Girl announced. "Since today's a Friday, and we've got two whole days before classes begin this year, I thought it'd be a good idea to have tours for the new first year students. We could do those tomorrow, and let them explore a little on their own Sunday. I've already organized a tour schedule by house; I just need volunteers. Anyone willing to give up a few hours tomorrow morning please stay behind. Thank you."

Most everyone ran out of the compartment before they could be unwillingly volunteered, but Harry wasn't as lucky. He was sitting next to the window, and Hermione was blocking his way to the exit.

"Oh Harry, let's volunteer! It will be so much fun. Think of all the things we can teach the first years before they've even had their first class. Just imagine if we had been given the opportunity. We could have avoided so much trouble those first few weeks. Remember how you and Ron were late the first time to class, and Professor McGonagall let the two of you...."

"Hermione," Harry interrupted her, "calm down! I think it's a great idea; I just wasn't prepared to give up my first day back to school. I've got a lot to do and all, and I still need to talk to some of the teachers."

"Oh please Harry. It will only take a few hours in the morning. You can have the rest of the day to yourself. It's more than we usually get the start of term."

It didn't seem like Hermione would give up, so Harry eventually gave in. He did make Hermione promise that they wouldn't spend more than a half hour in the library though, so at least he won a smaller battle. Also staying behind was Luna, Colin Creevy, Ernie McMillan, Terry Boot, Hannah Abbot, Susan Bones, and another Hufflepuff Harry didn't know.

"Thanks for volunteering everyone," the Head Girl, Violet something, smiled to everyone. "However, I only need eight volunteers, and we have nine. Two prefects for each house should be enough, so if someone wants to get out, now's the time."

The nine all looked around at each other, and at first it looked like no one would back out. Harry wished he could, but knew Hermione would be disappointed. It's not that he didn't want to give the tour, it's just that he had other things he could do with his time. Finally, Hannah Abbot came forward. She admitted to needing the extra time for revisions, and politely stepped out. That left eight, the magic number.

"Very good then," Violet continued. "I was hoping for some Slytherins to stay behind, but I'm not really surprised. So we don't have an even number of volunteers from each house. Anyone have any preferences on which house they want to show around?"

Luna and Terry immediately voiced their preference to show Ravenclaw around. Apparently there were some private libraries attached to their common room that they wanted to show the firsties. So Violet agreed and let them leave. That left the other six, and none of them spoke up about favoring their own house; although it was apparent that nobody wanted to show the new Slytherins around. That's why it surprised everyone when Harry spoke up next.

"Hermione, do you mind if we show around the Slytherins?"

She showed definite shock on her face, but shook her head and said she didn't mind. Everyone else was grateful that they didn't have to guide the Slytherins, so they didn't say a word. In the end it was agreed. Harry and Hermione would guide the Slytherins, Ernie and Susan would be in charge of the Hufflepuffs, and Colin and the other Hufflepuff (some seventh year named Patricia) had the Gryffindors. The tours would begin immediately after breakfast the following day, so they were instructed to stay behind in the Great Hall following breakfast.

On the way back to their own compartment Hermione got around to cornering Harry about his decision.

"Harry," she asked, "why would you of all people volunteer to take the Slytherins? I thought for sure that's the last thing you'd want to do."

Harry paused in the corridor and faced Hermione. "It makes sense if you think about it. So far, none of them have done anything to me. Heck, they're not even sorted yet. I figure if they can meet me before Malfoy and the others start telling their lies, some of them might not be so bad. I also need to start recruiting for the D.A., and figure it's as good of a place as any to begin. I've got to have some Slytherins after all, don't I?"

Hermione thought it very wise to give the new Slytherin students a chance, but was confused about the whole D.A. thing. "Harry, what do you mean recruit for the D.A.? We've got members already. That is, if we're allowed to continue."

"Oh, we are, don't worry. Dumbledore wrote me to say that he wanted me to keep up with the lessons. You'll find out all about it tonight, I'm sure. Let's get back." Harry resumed his walk, and quickly was back inside the filled compartment. An hour had passed already, which left about five before they reached Hogwarts. Harry hoped it was enough time to tell his tale. It all depended on how many questions he was asked. But before he could begin, there was something else he needed to do first.

"Harry, remember to use Pig to write to Professor McGonagall," Ginny reminded him.

"Thanks Ginny." Harry asked Hermione to borrow a piece of parchment and a quill, and wrote the short note while the others peppered him with questions.

"Harry, where's Hedwig?"

"Harry, why don't you use your own parchment? Where's your trunk in fact?"

"What's McGonagall on about Harry? Why do you have to write her?"

Harry laughed out loud at the barrage of questions. This only angered his friends, because they weren't being told. Only once he had tied the note to one of Pig's small legs, and thrown him out the window, did Harry relax back into his seat and begin to answer their questions.

"So you all want to hear where Hedwig is, huh?" Harry asked his friends.

"YES!" They all yelled back, except for Luna. She was immersed in studying the light rays cast on the wall through the train window. Harry knew that she was listening though.

"OK, OK, I'll tell you. But remember, no one else outside this compartment is to know. Well, remember at the start of summer how I escaped to Diagon Alley for a day? I told you all Hedwig got hurt, and I needed to get her fixed up."

The Weasley's and Hermione nodded, and Neville and Luna were quickly brought up to speed.

"Well, that was all a lie really. I'd been planning on visiting Diagon Alley since the Leaving Feast, and that's just the excuse I used to explain my absence. I said I bought all my textbooks a year early, but that's only the beginning. I bought a lot more as well."

He didn't go into specifics about every purchase he made, but Harry told them about most of the shops he visited. Hermione was impressed by the amount and variety of books he had purchased, and Harry promised to show them to her later. The girls took great interest in Harry's new robes, watch, and ring, while Ron and Neville wanted to hear more about Burke's private collection under his shop.

His pensieve also attracted some interest, but only because it was a rare wizarding object. Harry didn't mention that it contained the memories of a dead Death Eater. Ginny was the one who actually pleaded the most to see it, but Harry said no. All the objects were currently in his trunk, which he lied about being in a baggage compartment. Some of his secrets he didn't want to give away. Harry admitted to buying a new magical trunk like the one Moody had, but said nothing about it being so luxurious; or being commissioned by his late grandfather.

Likewise, Harry didn't tell his friends about his new wand, his new broom, or his magical tattoos. His complete summer activities would be a lot to take in at one time, and Harry didn't want to tell them too much at once. Besides, Ron would get even more jealous at seeing the new broomstick, especially tailored for his position.

Hermione was also a cause for concern. She above all else would be most likely to turn Harry in, or at least tell McGonagall or Dumbledore about him, if she knew the specifics of Harry's training regimen. She had already spent a good amount of time scolding Harry for going

into Knockturn Alley and buying illegal texts. So he told them nothing about finding and using a time tuner, or about the illegal magic he had learned. Harry told them all he found a way to practice magic without the Ministry noticing, but none of them knew the extent he had abused the privilege. They assumed Harry had simply practiced some of the charms and spells in the sixth year textbooks, and he let them believe just that.

The one thing the others had trouble believing was that Hedwig was now a phoenix, and wasn't present because she had just suffered through a burning day. In truth, Harry couldn't blame them. It did sound a bit far fetched. He didn't let on about the attempting mugging and how close he had come to being hurt, but just explained that Hedwig had burst into flames one night and emerged a white phoenix.

Harry considered not telling them about Hedwig at all, but knew that was one secret which couldn't be kept. Eventually Hedwig would show herself, and probably to more than just his closest friends. Besides, Harry thought he could really use Hermione's help in discovering the truth about how Hedwig had come to be. What information about phoenixes he had read talked about their powers and life cycles, but nothing had come even close to describing the rebirth he had witnessed. Hermione, and surprisingly Luna too, agreed to look into the subject once Hogwart's library was made available. Even with their skepticism, the idea that a phoenix could be created from another animal like an owl was fascinating, and appealed to the intellectual challenge in both girls.

The whole tale lasted about three hours, through which Harry answered and evaded many questions. Even Neville got into it a little, and asked a few smart inquiries which Harry answered with some barely convincing lies. He was pleased to see the once timid and shy boy become more comfortable with being assertive.

The one question he couldn't avoid, but yet he had to answer, was the one Ron got around to asking after the snack cart witch had stopped to deliver her tantalizing sweets. With a mouth full of chocolate frogs, Ron voiced the dreaded question.

"So where have you been? Mum wouldn't tell us at headquarters, and the other Order members seemed to not know. I reckon' it must've been a big secret if only Dumbledore and Remus knew where you were living this whole time."

"Actually," Harry answered nervously, "only Remus knew. And only for the past three weeks. I made him promise too not to tell anyone what I've been up to."

"You mean Dumbledore doesn't know where you've been living this past summer?" This came from Ginny. "But Harry, how did you get wherever you went without him? He must have been around to set up the security spells."

"There were no security spells; at least not from Dumbledore. I've been living in muggle London ever since my birthday. I found the place myself, and moved in without alerting the Order. Dobby and Winky have been living with me there, and helped in decorating the place and doing the chores. I sent them a letter with Hedwig and hired them right out from under Dumbledore's nose. He thinks they left to go work for a family of witches. That's what that letter I sent with Pig is all about. He wants to know if I showed up on the train at all. He didn't take me sneaking off on him too well, and has tried to force me back more than once this summer. I only told Remus where I was because I had a dream about Voldemort. Something important happened, and I needed to tell somebody. I figured he could be trusted; even if it meant not answering Dumbledore's questions."

"Harry!" Hermione and Ginny, and even surprisingly Ron admonished their friend. Hermione was the one most upset though, and she continued. "That was a really stupid thing to do. You could have been found out and hurt. Why didn't you just move into headquarters with Ron and Ginny? That way you could have been safe, and wouldn't have had to put up with the Dursleys."

Harry got a little angry at that. Didn't they understand? He didn't want to be at headquarters! The place reminded him too much of Sirius. And if that wasn't enough, he would have constantly been subjected to seeing Kreacher, Snape, that vile portrait of Mrs. Black, and a few others he didn't want to have any contact with. And there was no way

he would have been allowed to practice magic and train the way he wanted to under Dumbledore's watch. Uh uh, not going to happen.

"Why would I want to go back to that hellhole? To spend the whole summer spraying doxycide and avoiding a whole mess of people I don't want to see? Thank you, but no thanks." At the hurt look on Hermione's face, Harry calmed down some. The others too looked shocked. Harry had to remember that they didn't know about how Dumbledore had treated him like a kid, and had been lying to him for too many years. He tried to explain.

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just that a lot of things have happened to me in the past year; some of which none of you know about. Sure; bad things always happen to me, but this time it's different. I'm tired of being told what to do, and not having a say in my own life. Most of this business with Voldemort directly relates to me, after all. Shouldn't I have a say in it? But no, 'I'm too young. I'm just a kid, and can't even be trusted to stay out of trouble.' Professor Dumbledore and the others all treat me like that, and I've had enough. If I had just been told the truth last year, a lot of things would have turned out differently. Sirius might still be alive. So I ran off this summer, so I could live my own life. And you know what? I've had the best summer ever, and against all odds, I'm still alive. Even without Dumbledore's protection. Do you know that he actually sent Snape, Tonks, and Moody under invisibility cloaks to try and kidnap me, and drag me back to headquarters? They didn't even try to discuss the matter, they just made the decision that I wasn't able to look after myself, and went to capture me."

"What happened?" Sometime during his diatribe, Luna had focused her full attention on the group's discussion.

"One of the things I learned this summer was how to see through invisibility cloaks. I saw them coming a mile away, and escaped before they knew what was happening." The mood was still very tense, so Harry figured he'd lighten it up a bit.

"I even said 'So long, sucker!' to Snape."

“What!?” Harry’s remark definitely broke the somber atmosphere. Ginny and Ron were rolling on the ground with laughter, while Hermione tried to scold Harry about treating a professor with such disrespect. The attempt only lasted a few seconds however, before she gave in to her own giggles and joined in with the others. Even Luna’s face showed a genuine smile, which was rare for the ditzy Ravenclaw.

“Bloody brilliant Harry! I wish I was there to see it!” Ron had managed to pick himself up off the floor. “Fred and George would be so proud! Any chance of a repeat performance at the Welcoming Feast?”

‘Not likely,’ Harry thought, but laughed with the others. They asked a few more questions about the place Harry had moved in to, and he told them a little about the design. He mentioned having a large master suite, an exercise room, library, and guestrooms, but purposely didn’t convey how impressive the home really was. They all thought it was a typical muggle apartment, so he didn’t bother to mention the floo access or Fidelius Charm. And since they all knew that Harry had plenty of money to pay rent, no one questioned how Harry could afford the place.

The talk was kept lighthearted and jovial the next twenty minutes, until the compartment door opened. The group turned to see who it was, and Harry cursed under his breath. “Damn, every year!”

Standing just inside the door frame, flanked by his two hulking stooges, was none other than Draco Malfoy. The door had only opened a moment ago, and Harry didn’t know how they had already moved inside the compartment, but it was obvious Malfoy had overheard the group of friends laughing.

“What’s so funny Potter? Taking a look at Weasley’s new dress robes? They can’t possibly be as awful as last year, can they?”

It was two years ago that Ron had had the ugly maroon dress robes trimmed with lace, but Harry didn’t feel the need to correct Malfoy. If that was the best insult Draco could come up with; one which was wrong and inaccurate; than Harry privately thought the insult was on

him. Ginny must have thought so too, because she snickered at Malfoy's comment.

"What do you want Malfoy? You're not wanted here, so you might as well go away. I'd hate to see you get cursed again like you did last year. Actually, that's wrong; I'd love to see it! But it's getting a bit hard to breath in here with the stink you just let in, so I'd appreciate it if you left." Ron and Neville had slowly stepped in front of the girls, and both were fingering their robe pockets. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought that Ginny might have even already drawn hers. He didn't want anyone getting cursed the first day of school, so he hoped Ron and the others managed to hold their tempers. It wouldn't do well to get on Snape's bad side so early in the year. If anything happened to his golden boy, he was sure to hear.

Draco sneered at the insult. "I'd be careful if I were you Potter. You and the others got lucky last time. It seems you get lucky a lot. But that luck will run out eventually. And when it does, I hope I'm there with my father to see it happen."

As soon as the veiled threat left Draco's mouth, Ron stepped forward and got held back by Harry and Hermione. His face was as bright as his hair. "I wouldn't brag about that if I were you Malfoy! We'd love to see you in rotting prison with your criminal father."

Crabbe and Goyle laughed in their own Neanderthal way. Draco joined in too, with a cold laugh of his own.

"Haven't you heard Weasley? My father's been cleared of all charges, and got released from Ministry custody weeks ago. I think he's even going to get a settlement for wrongful imprisonment. Besides, I wasn't talking to you. You and the Mudblood should learn your place, and stay out of other's business."

Ron lunged forward for Draco as soon as the dreaded "M" word escaped his lips, but was held back by Hermione and Neville. It wasn't unusual for Ron to be provoked into action by the sneaky Slytherin, so the others had been prepared to stop him. None of them had been prepared for what Harry did though.

Before anyone even noticed, Harry stepped forward and punched Crabbe in the stomach. The huge boy bent forward with a grunt, and got a knee under his chin for his troubles. The uppercut pushed him out of the compartment, where he slumped to the floor.

Even as Crabbe continued to fall backwards, Harry pivoted on his right foot and sent a rough kick into Goyle. He was aiming for the boy's chest, but caught him a little lower than he planned. Even though the kick wasn't at all pretty, and was misaimed as well, it was still powerful enough to push the second minion out the compartment door. The whole room full of people had seen this second attack, and could only watch in amazement. Harry had never been as easy to anger in the past. Even Draco was stunned into silence. His condition was further improved upon when Harry reached out and grabbed Draco's throat with his right hand, and backed him up with his full weight. Harry had him pinned against the wall; Draco's throat in one hand and his wand hand in the other. Draco wasn't going anywhere.

"Not so tough now, are you Malfoy? Without your two idiot friends, you're just as helpless as a first year! You've called Hermione that one too many times, and I swear it had better be your last!"

"Harry, let him go!" Hermione had pushed her way through Ron and Neville, and went to end the fight. Even though she always took the brunt of Malfoy's name calling, it was always her that wanted to put a stop to any fighting that happened because of it.

Harry didn't care though. He had enough to worry about without some schoolyard bully constantly getting in his way. "Sorry Hermione, not yet. Not until he apologizes and promises to leave you alone."

"I don't care what he says Harry! He's just a stupid boy with stupid ideals. But if you don't let him go, you're going to get into trouble. He's a prefect and will no doubt report you for all this. If you hurt him further, you'll get loads of detentions!"

Malfoy had given up struggling in Harry's grasp. The two were about the same height now with Harry's recent "growth spurt," but he was no where near as strong as Harry was. Pureblood wizards shunned

physical conditioning, which Harry had plenty of. He did however resume his evil grin, even through the pained look on his face of having a hand wrapped around his neck. If he hadn't thought of reporting Harry by now, Hermione had just solved that problem. It didn't matter though.

"Actually Hermione," Harry explained, "I'm not breaking any school rules right now. Technically, we haven't yet arrived at Hogwarts, so I can do whatever I bloody well please as long as I don't use magic. According to chapter thirteen of the prefect's rulebook, I think paragraph eight or nine, only magical misconduct is subjective to school discipline while aboard the Hogwart's Express. I haven't even touched my wand, so I haven't done anything wrong. So let Draco complain to anyone he wants. All that can happen is that the entire school learns how he and his two lackeys got beat up by little ol' me."

The grin on Draco's face disappeared, and for good reason. Harry was sure that the others didn't know if the rule was correct or not, but he did. Everything he said was the truth. Although it was most definitely a loophole that would probably be soon corrected, Harry had no problem taking advantage of the situation. Hermione didn't know what to say, so said nothing. Ron had no problems breaking the silence though.

"Draco? Harry, since when do you call Malfoy Draco?"

Harry thought it a good question. He hadn't noticed until now, but more and more during the summer he had been using Draco's first name in his thoughts. He wondered why.

"I don't know," he answered. "I guess it's because I have so many other problems to worry about; he doesn't seem like such a threat anymore. He's just a pain in the ass. A little spoiled boy! Why should I call him by a man's name when I have other men to worry about? Voldemort's out planning my death, and the best he can do is thinking up new dirty tricks to use during our Quidditch game."

Even in Harry's death grip, Draco flinched at the mention of Voldemort's name. Ron and the others had heard it enough from Harry to not bat an eye. They might not be comfortable saying it

themselves, but hearing the forbidden word had become second nature months ago.

“See,” Harry noted, “he can’t even hear Voldemort’s name without cringing. And this is what I’ve been worried about for the past five years? Without his goons and his father’s money, there’s nothing here to be threatened by. So it ends now. Draco, leave me and my friends alone. I don’t ever want to hear you call them names again. If you do, there are worse things I can do to you than humiliate you like this. Got it?”

Draco had no choice but nod his head. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he was more bark than bite. And with his neck in a vice made of Potter’s hand, he just wanted to be freed.

Harry pushed Malfoy back into the corridor, where both Crabbe and Goyle were back on their feet, with lost looks on their faces. They had seen the whole incident from the corridor floor, but without Draco’s instruction, didn’t know what to do.

Malfoy crashed into his two thugs, and his hands immediately went up to rub his neck. Harry stepped forward to show that he still had no fear for the three of them, and went to close the compartment door. But then he remembered what had caused all this in the first place. Hermione.

“Draco, aren’t you forgetting something?” Malfoy didn’t look amused, but also didn’t know what Harry was talking about. Harry nodded his head towards Hermione to remind him.

It took a moment, but Malfoy did mutter out a “Sorry, Granger” loud enough to be heard. Harry congratulated him.

“That wasn’t so hard now, was it? And all you have to do now is leave us alone. You don’t have to like me Malfoy. In fact, feel free to hate me. I know I hate you. But you stay away, and so will I. See you on the pitch.”

Harry didn’t even wait for a reply as he closed the compartment door. Over the years he had learned a thing or two about pushing Draco’s

buttons. Malfoy wasn't the only one who could be insulting. Harry knew that the premature dismissal of Malfoy would be a far greater offense than almost anything else he could think of. And he was right. Just after he closed the door completely, he heard a barely audible voice. It was Draco.

"This isn't over Potter. Not by a long shot."

Turning back around to face his friends, Harry was greeted with a row of open mouths. They had seen a lot just happen, and were amazed at the changes in Harry. It wasn't that he had had the opinions and thoughts that he just expressed to Malfoy. All his close friends knew that he had those feelings. But the fact that he voiced them out loud, and stood up to Malfoy with such force, was a huge shock. Harry had never been so confrontational before. Not to mention, the extreme ass kicking he had just handed out.

"Oh," Harry said uncomfortably with a lopsided grin, "did I forget to mention that I learned how to fight this summer as well?"

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The rest of the train ride passed quickly enough, with the six friends playing exploding snap and wizard chess. After the extreme beating he suffered at the hands of Ron during both games, Harry mentioned to Hermione how looking forward he was to trying out his new chess set. Ron didn't know what they were talking about, but assured them both that he was unbeatable at chess. Harry and Hermione shared a conspiratory look and laughed.

Finally, an hour after the sun completely set, the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station, and came to a stop. Once getting off the train, Harry and the others were greeted with a booming voice they had sorely missed the year before.

"First years, Follow me! First years, this way!"

"Hagrid!" Harry thought he was a little too old to run up to his first friend and great him like he usually did, but managed an enthusiastic

wave other the heads of the many students. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione joined him in greeting the half-giant, and gave waves of their own.

“Alright there, Harry?” Hagrid’s welcomes never varied much, but that’s what Harry liked best about returning to Hogwarts; a welcoming sense of familiarity. The two caught up quickly, and Harry and his friends made plans to visit Hagrid for tea the Saturday after the first week of classes.

They all couldn’t fit into a single carriage, but that was alright. Ginny dragged Luna off to one with her “boyfriend” Dean Thomas. She said she wanted to catch up. Ron wasn’t happy about that at all, and actually started walking towards their carriage to join them, before he ran headlong into a massive dark creature. In the poor night light he hadn’t seen them yet, but Ron soon recognized the massive form of what could only be a thestral attached to the reins of a carriage.

“Oh my! They’re magnificent!” Hermione had a look of rapture on her face. “You always described how they looked Harry, but I never imagined they were so regal looking. I can see why people might get scared by them; they do appear to be a bit dark. But they’re much more majestic than evil.”

“You can see them then?” Harry wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer to his question.

“Of course I can see them! I don’t know how I never could before!”

Harry turned to his other friend. “How about you Ron?”

Ron nodded as well. He could see them too. A look across the open ground showed that Ginny could see them as well. Both she and Luna were petting the two thestrals attached to their carriage.

“Something wrong Harry? You sound like something’s the matter.” Hermione turned her attention away from the thestrals to study Harry more closely. He had a pensive look on his face.

"Nothing wrong really," Harry began. "It's just that I didn't want you to be able to see the thestrals is all."

At Hermione's questioning look, he continued. "If you can see the thestrals, that means that Sirius really died. I mean, I know he did and all, but. You know. I think I didn't want to really believe it. Nobody really knows how that veil works anyways, right? I was hoping that you wouldn't be able to see the thestrals. If that were true, then you couldn't possibly have seen someone die, and that would mean that Sirius might still have a chance. To come back from wherever he was sent. But now I know. He's really gone for good."

Harry silently watched his friends pet the dark horses while the other students disembarked off the train, when he was struck with a question.

"Hermione? How is it even possible for you to see them? You and Ron weren't in the veil room when Sirius went through. Neither was Ginny for that matter."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other nervously, and their looks almost turned to guilt. It was Ron who finally gathered enough of his Gryffindor courage to answer his friend.

"Remus showed us what happened, the three of us, later that night while we were in the hospital wing. Since we didn't know what happened, we wanted to hear about it, and Remus was the only one who would talk. He was pretty out of it actually. I don't think he even knew what he was saying. When he told us the prophecy was destroyed without ever being heard, Hermione had the idea that Remus's subconscious might have seen it happen. So he...."

"So he used a pensieve to show you what happened in the veil room," Harry finished for him. It was the only logical explanation. And Remus would have been devastated enough by Sirius's recent death to not put up an argument.

"Yeah," Hermione admitted, "he did. He snuck in at night with Dumbledore's pensieve and let us see. We were only supposed to stay long enough to try and hear the prophecy, but once all the

fighting started, we just couldn't leave. We saw it all; up until the end. Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry."

She had said it all before of course, but Hermione's most recent apology struck a chord in Harry's heart. He fought back tears to ask one final question. "So, did you hear the prophecy?"

Ron shook his head. "No. Remus never noticed it being destroyed, and he was the closet to it at the time, except for you and Neville. We saw a shadow come out from the ball, but there was nothing to hear. He must have not been paying enough attention."

Harry thought it was probably for the best, as he didn't yet feel like sharing that particular burden. He didn't say anything else, and climbed into the carriage before the others could comfort him. They didn't know how to, so it was for the best. Ron, Hermione, and Neville joined him after a few moments, and the trip to Hogwarts castle was made in silence.

Once past the large front doors, Harry's mood improved, and he actually raced Ron to the long Gryffindor table to get the best seat possible. He hadn't gotten a chance to eat as much as the others during the long train ride to school, and Harry was awfully hungry. The others had asked too many questions that required his mouth to be empty, so Harry had only managed a few Bertie Bott Beans.

Soon the Great Hall was full, and the new students were shown into the large room by Professor McGonagall in her traditional green robes. On her way down the middle aisle, past the four long house tables, she gave Harry a serious look. He didn't mind. Most of the professors at the head table had been staring at him since he had entered, except for Remus. While not technically a professor, he had resumed his old position at the staff table.

"Look, Remus is back! Do you think he's the defense professor again?" Hermione was excited at the prospect of having a qualified teacher again. Remus Lupin had been the best DADA professor in years. Everyone said so, even most of the Slytherins.

Harry hated to let her down. "No, he's an advisor for the newly reformed D.A. this year. He can't take on the full responsibilities of a professor with his condition, but Dumbledore thought it would be a good idea to have him around the castle. I'm sure he'll help us if we need any though. He loves to teach."

"Who's the new professor then?" Ron asked his friends. There weren't any other new faces at the faculty table. After a short moment, his face turned white. "You don't think Snape finally got it, do you? Not being able to take Potions was the one good thing about me doing so poorly on my OWL's. I don't think I could handle him in DADA."

"Shushhh! We'll just have to find out like everybody else, won't we." Ginny was sitting across from the other three with Dean on her side, and quieted down her brother. "The sorting's about to begin."

Indeed it was, and Harry noticed that someone had already dragged out the ragged Sorting Hat on its three legged stool. Harry settled in his seat as the room quieted, to listen to this year's song.

One thousand years ago or so,

When I was newly made.

My purpose was to sort the kids;

To show them on their way.

"You'll place the students in our houses,"

Is what the founders said.

"To ensure that they find their place

When we are gone and dead."

-

Clever Rowena, as fair as she was,
Prized great intellect and smarts.

So those who seek to learn the truth
Will find Ravenclaw close to your hearts.

-
Godric was proud, if a bit too rash,
Who showed great bravery and strength.

Those who believe in justice and good
Will measure Gryffindor robes for length.

-
Helga was a woman who knew that she'd
Never favor one student over another.

So those who show loyalty to a fault
Will find Hufflepuff like their own mother.

-
Salazar was the final of the four;
Immense ambition his greatest gift.

Those willing to do almost anything for advancement,
The Slytherin banner is one that you'll lift.

For many years I've said the same,
Just mixed and mingled my song.

But last year when I made a change,
I was ignored; hoped that I'd be wrong.

-

Great danger sweeps this land of ours.

The menace matters not which house you belong.

So I plead to you this one final time,
Join together, and hear next year's proper song.

-

But if you don't, which I fear the most;

And all four houses don't embrace.

I'll change my ways of sorting your young,
And find a new way to make my case.

Whispers and murmurs rang out in the crowd at the sorting hat's last verse. The song had been different than usual the previous year, but nothing like what was just said. Never before had the hat shown such fret for the wizarding world, and more than just the students became worried. Stone face McGonagall herself looked to the headmaster for support, but he simply nodded and made a gesture for the sorting to continue. After quieting the students down, she did. Harry privately wondered what the Sorting Hat had planned, and if he would get the chance to see it. He hoped not.

The sorting of students didn't take long, and no one stood out in Harry's mind. He did recognize a few surnames as those of his classmates, but that was all. He also paid special attention to the Slytherin students he'd see tomorrow morning, and pointed them out to Hermione. None seemed utterly unredeemable, so Harry took some small comfort in that.

When the new students were seated, and welcomed by their houses, Dumbledore rose to give his annual announcements.

"We all have much things to discuss this new start of term, but I have found in the past that ears open wider when stomachs are full. So without further adieu, Fidget Fudget Fedget. Tuck in!"

As strange as he ever was, Dumbledore still got a round of applause as golden dishes filled with all sorts of goodies appeared on the four long tables, and were instantly attacked by the ravenous students. Harry surprised even himself by devouring three full plates of food. The roast chicken and broiled bangers left his mouth mighty thirsty, but Harry suffered through the lack of drink. He remembered Burke's warning about the drinks of the Welcoming Feast being spiked with a potion, and didn't want to chance being retagged by Dumbledore. But he didn't want to give away the fact that he knew about the potion either, so he made grand gestures of having a variety of drinks. Every beverage on the table, including pumpkin juice, water, tea, and something he didn't recognize, had a turn in Harry's goblet. He lifted it to his lips like he always did, but never parted them to allow the liquids to enter. Instead, he secretly used his wand from under the table to vanquish the liquids from his glass. He'd had plenty of practice with the spell by vanquishing Wormtail's waste bucket, so it wasn't that difficult to fool everyone. Harry noticed with satisfaction that Dumbledore paid particular interest in Harry until he had a long "swallow" from his goblet. Once that was over with, the older wizard went back to his own meal.

After an even more decadent dessert spread, the tables were finally cleared and the students' stomachs were full. Dumbledore stood again to continue his opening speech.

"It pleases me to see all your familiar faces again, after my short sabbatical last year. I understand many rules have been changed in my absence, but please note that all "Educational Decrees" have since been revoked, and that the Inquisition Squad had been dismantled. While these actions I felt were not in the best interest of the school, in these troubled times, I do however feel additional security precautions must be made. So please note that the prefect patrolling schedule has been reinstated, and random auror guard posts have been placed on the outskirts of the school grounds.

"These measures have been taken in light of the state of affair we find ourselves in. As I am sure you are all aware from your parents; as I've been saying for over a year now; the Ministry had finally admitted that the dark lord Voldemort has indeed returned." Most of the students cringed at the name; not only the first years either. Dumbledore continued.

"As we've been warned in the past, and again just a moment ago by our own Sorting Hat, now is the time that we must come together as a society to ensure that his rein of terror isn't reestablished. In the past I have lectured on making the hard decision between choosing what is right, compared to what is easy. Now is the time to make those decisions for yourselves; waiting is no longer an option. Some of our very own have already suffered," Dumbledore paused to look at the mournful Hufflepuff table, "and I fear that unless we stand together to face our enemies, more will follow."

Harry reflected on the somber tone Dumbledore had used when speaking to the students. There was no doubt that none of them would get a good night sleep without reflecting on what he had said. 'But perhaps that's for the best,' Harry thought. 'It even only a few of the students change their minds about their stance in the upcoming war, while only sacrificing a few sleepless nights, then it is worth it, isn't it?' Harry didn't know, and turned his attention back to Dumbledore.

"Now on to more pleasant matters and the usual start-of-term notices. With the unfortunate departure of High Inquisitor Umbridge, a faculty position has opened up for a new professor of Defense Against the

Dark Arts. Someone new for a change.” The older students who got the joke laughed at Dumbledore’s obvious attempt at humor.

“I thought long and hard about who to appoint to the esteemed position, and after careful consideration, I am pleased to welcome back to our staff Professor Ruthesis Rofordit. Unfortunately she is unable to join us in time tonight, but rest assured that she will be present for classes beginning Monday morning.”

Harry leaned over to Hermione. “Any idea who that is?”

She shook her head. “I think I’ve heard the name before, but I’m not sure. Maybe she’s an author of some advanced books.” Harry didn’t recognize the name from his collection, so he didn’t think so.

“I know it too,” Ron added. “It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t remember where from.”

The rest of their conversation would have to wait, as Dumbledore continued with his speech.

“Professor Firenze will take on multiple responsibilities this year, as I’m pleased to announce that Professor Trelawney will be returning to our staff as well. Firenze will teach the stargazing portions of Divination, will teach the first through third year Astronomy classes, and will be assisting Hagrid as groundskeeper when needed. Please show Professor Firenze the respect he deserves when you see him, no matter in which capacity.

“I’m sure the older students remember Professor Lupin, who will also be joining us again in an advisory role to the defense club started last year by a number of students. Harry Potter, who was voted the club president, will be in charge of organizing meeting times and admitting new members. Is there anything you have to add Mr. Potter?”

Harry wasn’t expecting to be called upon during the Welcoming Feast, so hadn’t been prepared to say much. He felt that he had to say something though, and stood to address his classmates. The two faces that stuck out the most were Draco Malfoy’s sneer and Cho Chang’s smile.

"Um, I really don't have much to say right now. I wasn't expecting to start so soon. But this year the D.A. will continue in two groups. Last year's members will be in the advanced group, and any new members admitted will be in the novice one. Depending on skill and level of development, I might send old members to join the novice group, or promote new members into the advanced one. I'll post flyers this week about meeting times for anyone who's interested. That's about it, I guess."

It was obvious to Harry that his continuation as head of the D.A. came as a shock to most of the staff. Most had probably assumed that Lupin was the DADA professor again. McGonagall knew of course from his letter, but Snape showed nothing but utter loathing on his face at mention of the news. So far he had mostly avoided meeting Harry's eyes, but in just those few seconds after Dumbledore's announcement, he more than made up for ignoring Harry the whole time during supper.

"Very good Harry," Dumbledore smiled at Harry as he sat back down. "Please note that other school rules remain unchanged. First year students please remember that the Forbidden Forrest is strictly that; off limits. And I believe the school caretaker Mr. Filch has increased the list of prohibited items to include a selection of newly invented fireworks that caused some problems last year. He would also like me to remind you that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes. The full list of prohibited items can be seen at any time in the caretaker's office.

"Quidditch tryouts shall commence in three weeks, and I hope that all houses do their best this year to fill in the voids left by graduated students. This year marks the most student athletes, numbering twelve, leaving at once in over one hundred and fifty years. I expect all students out on the pitch to support their houses during tryouts."

Harry wasn't aware that so many other players had graduated from the other houses, and turned to Ron to discuss it with him. And they kept on discussing it right through the school song. Because everybody sang it in a different tune, Ron and Harry didn't even have to whisper, Ron just sang his comments to an old military march, and

Harry used a muggle nursery rhyme he'd learned while in primary school.

They were both glad that they weren't the only ones left in a bad situation, having many players leaving the same year. With Fred and George gone, and all three chasers as well, the Gryffindor team had at least five positions to fill. True the team had found two temporary beaters, and Ginny had filled in nicely as seeker and would make a hell of a chaser, but the formal tryout process would be tough.

Lost in his discussion, Harry missed the end of Dumbledore's speech, and must have missed him leaving the room as well; he was nowhere to be seen. Hermione and Ginny were busy ushering the new Gryffindors out of the Great Hall, so Harry didn't feel bad that he had forgotten about his prefect duties. He'd have plenty time tomorrow while guiding the new Slytherins to remember.

He and Ron followed behind the group of firsties, making their way to the Grand Staircase, when Harry was held behind by a strong hand on his shoulder. He figured it was one of his dorm mates with a joke for him, but was sorely mistaken.

"Mr. Potter," his Head of House, Professor McGonagall said, "please follow me. Professor Dumbledore would like a word in his office before you retire for the evening."

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AUTHOR NOTES:

Sorry I left the chapter there; I didn't mean to give you such a big cliffhanger. But it was the logical place to break, and the chapter is long enough already. 20 pages is my max! I hope everyone was satisfied with the reactions Harry got from his friends. I tried my best. In truth I could have gone on forever as I tend to do, but kept it as short as possible. So now we know that Harry told everyone the truth about running off to practice magic, but has kept most about what he's accomplished a secret still. You'll have to keep reading to find out how much he eventually gives away, and to whom. And I hope

everyone liked my Draco-bashing scene. I didn't want to use any magic because some are saying that Harry's already becoming too powerful, so I thought I'd show off some of the physical stuff he learned. Remember, he's been wrestling and sparing with his two others selves a part of every day, for over 6 months. That's a hell of a training regimen, and I think it justifies getting in a few lucky punches. Besides, Draco needs a good ass-kicking. Actually, he needs a few. The sorting song I wrote at one go in about 15 minutes, and I'm fairly pleased with how easily it came out. At first I was going to not write one, but knew that no HP fic would be complete without one. However, I admit to being no poet. So if anyone out there can do a better job, in either editing what I have or rewriting a whole new song that conveys the same idea, please send them my way. If I find one I like, I'll post it and give many kudos to the author. That's it for now. Next chapter, Harry vs. Dumbledore in a steel cage match! Just kidding, but they will have words, plus the first week of classes. Later. Oh, and anyone who wrote telling me what year Katie Bell was in school, please read my note to Josh Potter below. I will explain there.

Nhipps – I guess Harry could have stashed Hedwig in the trunk, but that doesn't seem nice. I have no idea how the physics of the trunk's inner space works while it's shrunken, and I have no intention of finding out. I confused my readers too much already with the time traveling stuff. If you want to speculate though, feel free. Thanks for reading.

HermioneGreen – I haven't heard from you since I gave permission for you to post your version of Harry's Hideaway of your website. I still think you should. I'm also interested in seeing if you'll take the challenge of trying to improve my sorting song. I think of all my reviewers, you're the one who might. Let me know.

Josh Potter – I know that it's theoretically possible for both Harry and Ginny to be very involved, and lose their virginity among worse things. But I think they're both too innocent for any of that, regardless of the lives they've led. And I doubt very much that JKR will have the two whoring around either. So I'm going to keep their relationship lighthearted, in what I think is in her style. As for Katie Bell, I've been getting dozens of conflicting stories about whether she's in 6th or 7th year in HP Book 5. People have cited page numbers and really gone

all out, and I still haven't come to a decisive conclusion. So I've decided to have her graduated in my fic, as that's what I had originally planned on.

TuxedoMac – Got Grease songs in your head, do you? Well, I can solve that problem. Hey Macarena! There, problem solved. You can thank me later.

Kate – Glad to hear you like my stuff. Your preferences are mine as well, that's how I came up with my story. I just included everything I liked that I've read before, and left out all the things I didn't. Thanks for the review.

Snuggle the Muggle – Thanks for your review, it really means a lot. I've said it before, but complements coming from authors you respect means a lot more than just some other random person. I happen to love your 2 main stories, so I really value your positive review. Here's hoping we both keep up the good work!

Earl – Harry has mastered Occulemcy, but yes, he does still suffer from visions. The point wasn't ever to block off Harry's visions. After all, they're a huge advantage he and Dumbledore have over Voldy. The point of the Occulmency training was to keep Harry from being unknowingly influenced. At least, that's the point in my story. That way, if Voldy sends him more false visions, this time Harry will know that they're not real. He may even be able to show Voldemort false memories when he's attacked in his dreams, depending on how I advance his study of Occulmency/Legilimency. I haven't decided yet the extent of the two skills. Thanks for the sharp attention to detail though. Keep me in line.

Jac – Thanks for the great review. I like the ideas I've come up with too. And I've got plenty more on the way. The HP Lexicon I keep talking about can be found by clicking on the link at . You have to look around for it a little, but it's there. It's a complete list of HP facts, including a complete list of characters, list of spells, maps to wizarding locations, a beastiary, etc. I've found it invaluable while writing my story, as I don't have to flip through my 5 huge volumes to find the littlest facts.

Frog1 – I don't think I'm going to spend as much time on the phoenixes' interaction as you would like, but there will be some. Just to let you know, I don't hold Fawkes accountable for his master's actions. And I don't think Hedwig will either. Actually, your scenario could be a cute little flet on its own. If you write any stories yourself, feel free to use my interpretation of Hedwig in your own story. Expect for Hedwig to make her first appearance 2 chapters from now.

Narishma – Damn it, I knew that someone would catch that mistake. Yes, I have Harry taking jewels from his family vault, even though I established in Ch. 4 that he couldn't. It was a mistake on my part, one that I didn't catch until I posted the chapter. I haven't decided yet to correct it in Ch. 4 or 11, but I will eventually. Good eye for detail though. And thanks for the great review, I'm glad you managed more than to just say "Good Job."

Matthew Conolly – No, Dumble wasn't trying to lace Lupin's tea with a truth serum (Although I wouldn't put it past him). As for your predictions, some are way off, and others are spot on. I won't say which though, because I don't want to ruin the story. None of them happen soon, so I don't want to let on. But when I do, I'll go back and mention you.

Drajjen – I appreciate your review, even though you seem deathly opposed to Harry/Ginny. I can only promise that the relationship will evolve very slowly, and that I hope you stick around to read it. As for your interpretation of fanfic, I disagree, but that's OK. I think that if authors write totally against a character's already established personality, then they might as well be writing a brand new story. Why use established character names at all? Come on! A story about Harry becoming a dark lord, raping Hermione and Ginny, killing Dumbledore and his teachers, befriending Draco and Voldemort, and falling in love with Snape doesn't have even a remote possibility of happening. So I say, that's not proper fanfiction. But you can make Harry a little dark, or introduce a little slash, just as long as it's subtle and works within the character. For instance, in BarbLP's stories "Triangle Prophecy" and "Lost Generation" she makes the character Remus Lupin gay. Although I hate slash stories, and I tend not to read them, I find that in her case she did it with a lot of respect and

class. She justified her beliefs, and made me honestly believe that it's a possibility in true HP cannon. That's great fanfiction. Thanks for the great review though, even if we don't share the same opinions.

I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving almost 100 reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

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Updated 8/8/04

I know originally my grammar and spelling could have been better, so I've gone through (I had to for the Schnoogle version anyway) and corrected al that I could find. This is the final version, folks! If you would like to reread the entire fic, there's also other stuff I changed to, besides the spelling. Nothing that will confuse a reader if they don't, but just enough to clean up some edges, and fix some mistakes in the mythology I made. Later all!

Ross

Chapter 13 – School Daze

The trip to the headmaster's office was made in silence, regardless of the fact that each had a lot to say to the other. McGonagall herself was dying to know what Harry had been up to the summer, but refrained from asking at the headmaster's request. Harry had a few questions about the Quidditch season for his head of house, and wanted to know what she was told about his situation as well, but didn't say anything. He knew this day was coming ever since he wrote that first letter to Dumbledore.

Finally the two reached the gargoyle statue at the bottom of the spiral staircase. McGonagall wanted more than anything to accompany her student up the steps, but knew she couldn't.

"The headmaster is waiting for you, Mr. Potter. The password is 'Cauldron Cakes' for the next fortnight. Use it at your discretion. I'll see you in class Tuesday." Without another word, McGonagall left Harry alone, turning down one of the castle's many twisted corridors.

Harry waited a few moments before saying the password and riding the staircase up to the headmaster's office. In that time he gathered his wits, and quickly went over the story he had prepared for just this instance. When he arrived at the top of the stairs, he knocked on the door softly, and was rewarded a moment later.

"Come in Harry." Some things never changed.

Harry opened the door and was met with a view of the office virtually unchanged from the last time he had seen it. All the silver instruments he had broken were either repaired or replaced, and were in the exact positions they had previously taken. Dumbledore's desk too, which Harry had flipped over and broken, was repaired and back in excellent condition. The many portraits of past headmasters and headmistresses slumbered in their usual state, but Harry caught a few eyes open in the corners of his peripheral sight. One portrait who didn't bother to fake being awake was that of Phineas Nigellus. His last meeting with Harry hadn't been a good one, and Harry feared that Phineas still blamed him for the ending the Black line. No matter how much Sirius wasn't liked by the rest of his relatives; he was still

the heir to the prominent pureblooded family. Now, that family was gone.

"Ah, Harry, how good to see you! I was much worried these past few months at your disappearance. I'm glad to see that you return to us unharmed."

Dumbledore certainly didn't waste any time getting to the matter at hand. Harry actually preferred that, and likewise didn't waste any time.

"I told you sir, that I would be fine." Harry reminded him. "And I didn't disappear; Remus and others knew where I was. I just wanted some freedom this summer, and unfortunately, that meant disappearing from you."

While he said this, Harry took the offered seat in front of Dumbledore's desk, and helped himself to a tray of cookies as well. He hardly had room after the huge feast he had just left, but wanted to appear at ease in the headmaster's office. He didn't want to show that he was plenty nervous.

Dumbledore frowned as Harry ate his cookie, while he pondered what to say next. He was trying to convince Harry that he only had his best interests at heart, but with the rift between the two, it was hard to do.

"Harry," he finally began, "I understand your need for a degree of freedom in your life, especially considering the life you've led before attending Hogwarts. However, as I'm sure you know, you're also at a great level of danger most of the time, especially now with Voldemort publicly back in action. For you to simply go off on your own is unacceptable. You must be looked after; at all costs. I don't know where you've been this past month, or how you've survived, but I can assure you it was accomplished with a great deal of luck. Do you know that our spies tell us Voldemort himself is aware that you had gone missing? The moment you left your relatives, the blood magic that protects you greatly weakened. So much in fact, that Death Eaters were able to approach your uncle at his workplace to question him about you. Luckily Order members were able to interrupt them before any serious damage could be done, but do you see how dangerous this game is you're playing? Now that you're back at

school a lot of this information is moot, but Harry, I implore you, consider your actions next time before acting on them.”

Harry didn't take much time to think about a reply to what Dumbledore had said, because he largely ignored it. “Headmaster, I told you a month ago in my letter that I didn't want to be scolded for going against your wishes. That's exactly what you're doing now. The truth is you have no idea what I've been doing these last weeks, so you're in no position to tell me what ‘serious damage’ I've done. I don't care about any blood magic being weakened. And I don't care what happens to the Dursleys. Whatever they get they greatly deserve twice over, so they're not my concern. And seeing as how I'm never going back there, I don't see any future problems.”

“But Harry, you must return next summer to strengthen the bonds that....”

“I mustn't do anything you say!” Harry yelled. At realizing he was raising his voice at Dumbledore again, he took a few breaths and calmed down. He then continued. “At least, unless it has to do with my schooling. I'll certainly listen to your advice, but hear me well. The final decision about what to do in my life comes down to me and me alone. Too many times you've interfered with my life, and have caused me undue pain and suffering. I won't let that happen again. I've got my own agenda now, and it won't necessarily correspond to yours anymore.”

Dumbledore was about to ask about the interfering he had been accused of, but Harry didn't let him. Instead, Harry slid across a yellowed piece of parchment that answered the old wizard's questions. It was the letter Harry had found in his family vault, addressed to him posthumously by his parents. Dumbledore picked it up and read it silently. When he got to the part about Harry either being placed in Sirius's care, or being placed with a family that would love him, Harry could tell by the surprise in Dumbledore's eyes.

“As you can see,” Harry explained, “I found out some more secrets you've been keeping from me. I warned you to come clean, and you haven't. And this letter isn't even the beginning of what I've discovered.”

Dumbledore tried to explain. "Harry, you must understand there were reasons I kept this from you. You couldn't...."

"What possible reason could there be for keeping track of how much money I spend?" Harry didn't let him finish. Even if Dumbledore felt the reasons were justified, Harry didn't. He had made his position abundantly clear in the past, and Dumbledore had lost his chance. "What about my family vault? Just one of the many books in there, or the furniture, or even this letter, could have told me more about my family than anyone else has before. What right do you have to keep this from me?"

Dumbledore's face was shocked. "You entered your family vault?" If it were true, Dumbledore knew that there was nothing he could say or do to regain Harry's trust. He did have his reasons of course, but they were hard to explain to an emotional teenager. And were they even worth their original intentions; decided so long ago? Dumbledore began to question himself for the first time in many years.

"Yeah, I did. So you can see why I'm so upset! So Professor Dumbledore, I thank you for letting me continue with the DA this year, and for lifting my ban on Quidditch. I have no doubt that you're one of the best headmasters Hogwarts has had in a long while, and I'll continue my schooling under your supervision. But I just don't trust you anymore to make decisions affecting my personal life."

The two of them would have gone on for some time further, if they hadn't then been interrupted by a knock at the door. Both Harry and Dumbledore turned their heads to look in the direction, and they both spoke at the same time. The person on the other side of the door was not one to keep waiting.

"Come in, Minister Fudge/Cornelius." At hearing Harry's words echo his own, Dumbledore's glare turned once more to pierce that of Harry's. How had he detected the presence of the Minister? Just one more question Dumbledore had for young Harry.

"Albus, sorry to interrupt you so late at night, but I had a splendid idea that I'd like to move along on as soon as possible." The Minister didn't

even pause long enough to look around the room, as he barged in and hung his bowler on a hat rack in the corner of the circular room. Magic could do wonderful things.

"I'd like to arrange a press conference to...." Fudge stopped in his yammering when he finally spotted Harry. "Ah, Mr. Potter, how good to see you again. Actually I'm glad you're here, as my idea largely has to do with you."

It amazed Harry how the man could greet him as if the two were old friends. Not two months ago, Harry was being called a liar and a troublemaker by the Minister. A few months before that, Harry was labeled a "crazy" who couldn't be trusted. Harry didn't know many other than the ones he had met during his trial, but he really hated politicians.

"What idea would that be Minister Fudge?" He asked.

Fudge took the other seat in front of Dumbledore's desk as he explained his visit.

"Why Harry, you've been approved for the prestigious award of Order of Merlin, Third Class, for your ongoing efforts to not only fight He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but by surviving multiple encounters with him as well. This last time at the Ministry being your most valiant attempt. After much investigation by my own office, we've uncovered that when you learned that You-Know-Who was going to break into the Department of Mysteries to steal a highly guarded prophecy, none of the school staff believed your claims. So you took it upon yourself to thwart the evil wizards. I'd like to hold a press conference to bestow the award on you, for your dedicated commitment to uphold Ministry of Magic laws and regulations, and to show the wizarding world that the Boy-Who-Lived and the Minister of Magic are working side by side to do all that they can to stop any further Death Eater acts of terror. Why, with the recapture of You-Know-Who's most trusted servants, I don't doubt that his days are numbered."

Dumbledore remained silent during Fudge's tirade, but Harry couldn't take any more of it. Enough was enough.

"But that's not what happened! I didn't even know of the prophecy till I was already there! And there's plenty of other Death Eaters out there still. Lucius Malfoy, Nott, Avery, McNair, Bellatrix Lestrange! They all got away Scott free."

Fudge didn't pause long enough to even consider Harry's words. "Nonsense. What other reason could you possibly had to be in the Department of Mysteries that night? Besides, my investigation team has reached their final conclusions. The team leader even knows you quite well. Percy Weatherby; I believe you know his family. And Lucius Malfoy and the others were found to simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's been proven innocent of all charges. True, Bellatrix Lestrange did manage to elude capture, but that won't last long. She's all alone now with her husband back in Azkaban. She can't be very stable at the moment. It's just a matter of time until we capture her and she leads us to the few others still out there. Problem solved, I say!"

Harry couldn't believe that Fudge could be so pigheaded, even taking into account the things he had seen the man do and say before. Even then, Fudge continued to spew utter nonsense about how the Ministry was back in control of the situation, as had been their plan the whole time. Dumbledore didn't even try to argue with Fudge's proclamation, and Harry now knew why. The man couldn't be reasoned with! 'Well,' Harry thought, 'maybe I can use this to my advantage.' The rough outline of a plan started to form in Harry's mind, and he believed it was doable. It would take some creative planning and a few well written letters, but Harry came to believe more and more that it would all work out.

"Count me in, Minister. I'd be honored to accept an Order of Merlin from you."

Both men stopped cold in their tracks when Harry spoke up. He didn't know which was more surprised; Fudge at so easily convincing him to agree to the award, or Dumbledore, who was surprised that Harry would participate in such an obvious attempt for the Minister to gain public favor. It was hard to keep a straight face, but Harry managed. Dumbledore reclaimed his wits before the other, and he was the first to speak.

"Harry, perhaps you should think this through before making any rash decisions. After all, accepting an award of such prestige is a lot of responsibility."

"Nonsense Albus," Fudge disagreed, "what's there to think about? It's a great honor for such a young wizard to receive an award like this. I'll make all the arrangements then. How does this weekend sound to you Harry? We can have the press conference in Hogsmeade, and I'm sure Professor Dumbledore can make arrangements for you to be escorted into town."

Harry agreed. "Sounds good, Minister. After all, if an Order of Merlin was good enough for Peter Pettigrew, than it's good enough for me.

"Yes, Pettigrew," Fudge reminisced, "a fine man. It's a shame that traitorous Black killed him before the ministry found out about Black's involvement with You-Know-Who. A truly heroic man."

Both Harry and Dumbledore knew differently, but said nothing. They had tried to convince Fudge of Sirius' innocence before, and that hadn't worked. So Harry let the pompous man think what he wanted. He knew the real truth.

After that, Fudge left as quickly as possible before Harry could change his mind. Harry stood too and made ready to leave, when he was interrupted by Dumbledore.

"Harry, we aren't done here yet. I still think you should reconsider accepting this award. You must see that the Minister has ulterior plans. And we haven't finished our discussion about your summer either." While Dumbledore spoke, Harry noticed his mind was being lightly probed by an excellent Legilimens. Dumbledore was trying to read his mind!

Harry brought up his inner defense walls to full alert while Dumbledore sifted through the random thoughts of his outer mind sphere. Not knowing he had already been detected, Dumbledore spread his mental powers thin, to cover as much space as possible. That made him susceptible to attack. Without any warning, Harry

directed his thoughts of the Dursleys' treatment toward him to his outer sphere. The same areas in fact that Dumbledore was searching through. All the hate he had felt; all the emotional pain, the neglect, and the abuse he had ever been subjected to by the Dursleys rushed from its tightly contained subset into Harry's outer sphere, and assaulted Dumbledore with force. Served him right!

Dumbledore's eyes snapped closed as he relived the many verbal assaults and physical beatings Harry had endured the first ten years of his life. Because Dumbledore's mental facilities were spread so thin, it would take a good deal of time before the wizard was strong enough to break free from Harry's grasp. He had thought that Harry was still an amateur at best; he had no idea that Harry might now be even more advanced at Occlumency than he himself was. The punishment would have gone on even longer, but Harry took pity on Dumbledore after a few more short moments.

"Yes, we are done here. I'll decide whether to accept the Order of Merlin or not, and I choose to attend the ceremony. And about my summer, so far you haven't asked one single question. You've just accused me of not knowing what's for my own good. If you come up with any actual questions, which you're not just asking so you can regain some control over me, I'll be glad to answer them. As you can tell, I've been studying more than just 6th year potions this summer. That's what I've been doing with most of my time; studying and practicing. In the future I would suggest staying out of my head without permission. You might not like what you see."

Without another word, Harry left the room, and climbed the long staircase to Gryffindor tower where his roommates were already sleeping. He removed his shrunken trunk from his pocket, placed it at the foot of his familiar four poster bed, and changed into a set of his silk pajamas. The weather wasn't cold enough to need them, but with the open windows and cool Scottish breezes, Harry wanted the comfort they provided compared to just sleeping in his cotton boxers. The feel of silk on his skin helped Harry focus as he reorganized his mind's spheres, and put back the memories he had unleashed in Dumbledore's office. Thirty minutes later, Harry too was asleep.

In his own private quarters, attached to the circular office he had just left, Dumbledore too thought about the memories Harry had just subjected him to. Had the Dursleys really been that bad? If they were; which was most certainly the case; then he didn't blame Harry for wanting to get away from them. Dumbledore had never been one to judge people in the past. Each person, no matter their choices in life, had both faults and positive attributes that shaped their character. But the horrors he had seen directed at Harry his whole life, starting at the age of a mere toddler, were beyond approach. As he fell asleep, long after all the students and staff that occupied the castle, Dumbledore slowly began to understand just how upset and angry Harry was with his position in life. And that greatly troubled him. For if it was true, then Dumbledore feared he might have not just weakened it as he suspected. He feared that he might have already lost young Harry Potter's trust completely.

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The next morning proceeded without incident. Since it was Saturday, breakfast was delayed till its usual weekend time, and the whole student body had a chance to lie in.

After the meal, which Dumbledore had only looked at Harry once to try and apologize with his eyes, most of the student population left to do whatever it was that students do on weekends. Most would probably be doing some last minute summer homework, but Filch suspected that they were all up to no good. He wasn't happy that the first days back were a class free weekend, and made no attempt to hide the fact. He prowled the halls as vigilantly as always.

Snape wasn't too happy when he discovered that two of his most hated Gryffindors were slated to give his students a tour of the school grounds, but couldn't do anything about it. Since no Slytherins had volunteered to take their place, and he had lesson plans to finalize, he made do with leaving after giving Harry and Hermione a stern warning.

"Potter, Granger! Make sure you stick to only what the students absolutely need to know. Keep your Gryffindor prejudices and heroics to yourself. If I hear that these students were mistreated in any way,

or that they've been told a bunch of blatant lies, then you two will have the honor of being the first students in Hogwart's history to serve detention before classes even begin. Do I make myself understood?"

After that, the morning ran more smoothly. Because of her knowledge imparted to her by many years of reading "Hogwarts: A History," Hermione took it upon herself to lead the tour of first year students along the halls and empty classrooms. Harry brought up the rear of the group, and only interrupted Hermione a few times when he had something additional to say about a certain hallway or painting. The tour schedule had been developed by the Head Girl ahead of time so the four tours wouldn't interrupt each other, and so for the next two hours, Harry and Hermione had only the nine new Slytherins for company.

To give them credit, the first year students listened attentively, and caused no trouble. Harry thought that it was because of the stern McGonagall-like expression Hermione was wearing, but wasn't positive. Most of the students also took many quick peeks at Harry's forehead, as if to prove to themselves that he was indeed Harry Potter. So far, he didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

As promised, Hermione kept her part of the tour in the library to a half hour, even though she suggested that the students come back in their spare time to further acquaint themselves with the cataloging system.

"The library here at Hogwarts is among the most well respected in all of Europe. A half hour isn't nearly enough time to get to know the intricacies of such a large inventory. As this will be as much of your home as your dormitories during the next seven years of your life, I highly recommend spending some of your free time here to really get to know the place. Madame Pince as well can be a great source of information as long as you get on her good side, by following her rules and keeping any social conversations out of her library. Madame Pince likes her library staying quiet."

About halfway through the tour, Hermione thought it would be a good idea to stop at one of the small lounges on the third floor to give the

first years a chance to ask any questions they might have. There were only eight chairs available, so Harry waved his wand to conjure three more for him, Hermione, and the odd student. Hermione raised her eye at Harry's talent, but said nothing in front of the younger students.

"Wow! Will we be able to do that after a year in class?" The small girl Rebecca, one of the few muggleborn students in Slytherin Harry and Hermione found out, asked the question about Harry's conjuring skills.

"No Rebecca," Harry answered, "that takes a few years to learn. It's actually a 7th year spell, but I know it because I studied it ahead of time this past summer. The chairs will only last for an hour at the most, and then they will disappear. It takes a lot of strength and practice to conjure and object that will last permanently." Harry lied about the chair, in part because he didn't want to be subjected to Hermione's endless questions, and in part because he didn't want it to leak to other students that he was capable of such advanced skills. What Voldemort didn't know, in this case, could hurt him want it to leak to other students. Harry reminded himself to vanish the chairs before they left.

"What else can you do?" Rebecca asked in reply.

Harry gave Hermione a quick look, but she just shrugged her shoulders. These weren't the type of questions Hermione was prepared to answer. She wanted to be asked about the history of Hogwarts' founders, or the building of the castle. Harry didn't think it could hurt, so he showed the group a few simple charms.

He levitated the coffee table a few feet off the floor, changed the color of it to a horrible shade of purple, and then added a sound charm to it so that every time someone would put their feet upon the table, it would make a sound like a hippogriff. The Slytherins enjoyed the talking table for a few moments, before it lost its appeal, and Harry returned it to normal. None of the spells were beyond what he was supposed to know, so Hermione wasn't impressed either.

"Those are some of the spells you'll learn this year in Charms class. It's only your first year, so more advanced stuff will have to wait until later. But it's still loads of fun."

Of the nine first year students, Rebecca's eyes were the widest during the whole demonstration. She was obviously impressed, and asked if she could see more.

"What's the matter with you?" Another boy her age asked. "You act like you've never seen magic before. Haven't your parents shown you all this?"

Rebecca looked uncertainly at the boy before she answered, but did so with a confident strong voice. "I've never seen magic before, because I'm what your kind calls muggleborn. I still don't know exactly what that means, but I didn't even know magic existed a few weeks ago. All this is so amazing to me."

Another student in the group seemed to have a problem with her being muggleborn. Of all the first year Slytherins, Harry thought this one would be the most trouble. The student's name was Loren Zabini, and Loren looked just as androgynous as the older sibling.

"That's impossible!" Loren exclaimed. "There's no such thing as a muggleborn Slytherin. We're all purebloods."

Some of the others nodded in agreement, and some didn't know what to think. This type of stereotype is the exact reason why Harry chose the group of Slytherins over the other houses. Hopefully, he'd be able to stem any hateful attitudes before they could develop.

"Actually Loren," Harry corrected, "that's not entirely true. Although they're rare, there have been many muggleborn or mixed blooded Slytherins. I'm sure they just keep quiet about it because of the house prejudice. I'm muggle raised, and my mother was muggleborn, and the sorting hat tried to put me in Slytherin at first. I only asked to be put in Gryffindor because the only friend I had at the time had already been placed there."

A quiet girl who hadn't yet said a word, Staci, was surprised. "You mean you were almost a Slytherin? Harry Potter a Slytherin; imagine that."

Harry laughed with the rest of them. Even Hermione found a little humor in the situation. It was widely known throughout the wizarding world that Harry displayed his Gryffindor colors proudly.

"You want to hear something else even more ironic?" All the kids nodded. "Well, Voldemort himself, who's the actual heir to Slytherin, is a half breed too. His father was a muggle. Of course he doesn't spread that particular rumor around, but it's true."

Harry knew he was taking a gamble with the Slytherins, but was willing to risk it. What was the worst that could happen? Nine more Slytherins would hate him? He wouldn't even notice the additional amount. But if he could get these nine to believe in the truth, than maybe future generations of students wouldn't be so quick to judge. As he knew would happen, eight of the nine students cringed with fear at the mention of the name, while Rebecca remained blissfully ignorant.

Todd, another of the boys, didn't believe Harry. "That's not true. You-Know-Who hates muggleborns. That's the whole reason behind what he's doing. His father can't be a muggle!"

Harry was encouraged that at least he hadn't used the word "Mudblood." He might have a chance to get to know and like these students after all.

"Actually, it is the truth. Voldemort's real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle Jr., named after his muggle father." Harry took the time to write the name out in smoke, and rearranged the letters to prove his point. "His father abandoned him and his mother before he was born, so Voldemort swore he'd have nothing to do with him. His hate for his father transferred to a hate for all muggles, even though it's a stupid reason. Years later, Voldemort went back and killed his father, and his father's new family. Now, he fools all his believers by changing his name and omitting the fact that he's half muggle. All his pureblood worshipers would probably mutiny if they found out the truth."

A girl asked Harry how he found this all out, and he gave them a brief description of his second year and the magical diary. He left out Ginny's involvement and the number of students who had been petrified, but got the point across of how his final encounter had come to pass. After that, it was a free for all on Harry.

"Did you really duel You-Know-Who and win?"

"I heard you killed a basilisk with your bare hands!"

"Can you really turn into a phoenix?"

"My cousin says that you killed a Death Eater in cold blood. Is that true?"

This wasn't exactly what Harry had planned, but he wasn't surprised. Hermione too looked to be very upset. The extra time these questions were taking had delayed them from their schedule, and if anything, Hermione hated to deviate from a schedule.

"OK, OK, listen! Settle down!" The questions stopped, and Harry made a deal with them. "How about this? No more questions about me or Death Eaters during the tour so we can finish. Then afterwards if you want, we'll go into an empty classroom and you can ask me a couple of questions. Sound good?"

The first year Slytherins quickly agreed, and the tour continued. Hermione was much happier back in her element, and made up for lost time as she lectured them all on the history of different suits of armor and told them all which trick steps they should avoid on certain days.

When the tour finished, Hermione excused herself to the library, and Harry and the nine Slytherins entered an empty fourth floor classroom to sit and talk. The questions they asked for the most part were absurd, but Harry kept his promise. Most of the good questions he couldn't even answer himself, as he still wasn't sure how he had originally survived Voldemort's first assault. But they learned the most important things about him. That yes, he had fought Voldemort and

lived to tell about it. And that no, he didn't hate all Slytherins, only some of them who gave their house a bad name. Harry even went as far as to tell them that he personally knew of a Gryffindor who had done far worse things than most Slytherins, and that a Death Eater could come from any house. Loren Zabini especially had a lot to think about at hearing the truth. Either the Zabini family or some of their friends had long ago told Loren that Harry Potter hated anyone who wasn't a Gryffindor, and that he was a spoiled brat who thought he could get away with anything. After spending the morning with him, that didn't seem the case.

Eventually Harry got tired of the many questions, and they were becoming a bit too personally for his taste, so he put a stop to them. Everyone complained of course, but Harry had an idea how he could further befriend the nine youngsters.

"I'll tell you what. How about on the way back down to the lunch, I show you some of the secret passages I've discovered over the years?"

"Secret passages?" This came from Lizzy, one of the girls. "There aren't really secret passages, are there?"

"Sure there are." Harry replied. "No castle can be complete without secret passages. I've discovered loads in the five years I've been here, and I'm sure there are dozens more. Come on, let's go!"

In truth, Harry only showed them a few of the better known passages that would save time while running between classes, but the whole group thought finding each one was like unearthing another wonder of the world. The last passage Harry showed them, a narrow tunnel that started in a dead end corridor off the Great Hall, ended in the same hallway that the door to the Slytherin common room was located on. Harry showed them this before he had a chance to think about what he was giving away. Loren Zabini caught on though, and questioned Harry about it.

"How do you know where the Slytherin common room is? That's supposed to be secret!"

Harry got a little nervous, but answered with one of his lopsided grins.

"Let's just say that secret passages aren't the only things I've discovered in the past five years. There's loads more to Hogwarts than meets the eye, and I've found a fair bit of it."

Without saying anything more, Harry led the group back up the tunnel to the Great Hall for lunch.

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The rest of Saturday and all of Sunday passed without incident, and Harry spent most of his time catching up with friends and getting prepared for the first week of classes. Because he was only taking a total of five classes, his schedule wasn't as heavy as most of the other students, but Harry still wanted to be prepared.

The schedules were actually handed out Sunday morning at breakfast, a day earlier than normal. Each of Harry's five classes met twice a week, and as luck provided, Harry only had two classes a day. One in the morning, and one in the afternoon. The times varied because there were five periods in each day, but Harry was still left with a lot of extra time during the week.

"How'd you only get five classes, mate? I thought you did well on your OWL's? Even I got seven classes." Ron had qualified for NEWT level classes in DADA, Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology, and Divination. Because of his low grades and losing the title of prefect, it was decided by his mother and McGonagall that he would also have to take remedial Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions. His small comfort was that the remedial classes weren't taught by the same professors. They were taught by a secondary teaching staff, who only worked at the castle part time. So few students opted to take the remedial classes, there wasn't a need for them to work more than one or two days a week. In fact, most of the secondary staff was only a few years older than the students, and lived in Hogsmeade or other nearby towns.

Harry answered Ron, and Hermione as well because she had raised an eyebrow at seeing Harry's schedule. "I only chose to take the five

classes. I qualified for more, but didn't want to waste the time. I've got other things to do that will be more beneficial than Herbology or Astronomy."

"Oh but Harry," Hermione lectured, "your NEWT scores will largely dictate what type of job you can get once you graduate. You're severely limiting yourself by only taking five NEWT level classes."

"Four actually. I've decided to take Arithmancy, but McGonagall won't let me take the sixth year level class. She says I've got to pass my OWL first, so I'll be taking the class with fifth years."

Hermione wasn't pleased with the news, as she thought Harry was capable of much more. Ron likewise wasn't happy either. Although he knew he didn't do as well as his two other friends, he had hoped that the NEWT level classes he did have would all be together. Now, the only class they would share was DADA. Hermione was in Herbology with him, but he'd have to take CoMC and Divination alone. Facing Trelawney with only Pavarti and Lavender as his fellow Gryffindors wasn't a pleasant thought.

Monday morning finally rolled around, and Harry's first class was Charms. It wasn't the first period of the day, so Harry had some time right after breakfast before class. While nearly everyone else was in class, Harry rushed back to his dorm to take an extra long shower in his trunk and to get his books. One of the purchases he had bought was a new bag to replace Dudley's old worn one. It was charmed to be feather light no matter how many books it held, but Harry only used it for the bare essentials. If he put his entire library in it after all, he'd never find the book he was looking for.

Charms class was more of an introduction than anything else. Since the class format changed over previous years, Professor Flitwick took the time to go over the course syllabus and introduce all the students who may not know each other. In NEWT level classes, all four houses had class together, instead of divided up by house. It made for a larger class size sometimes, especially in popular subjects like Charms, but Professor Flitwick assured the class that he'd show just as much personal attention as always.

Harry sat by the door with Hermione and Dean in class, and it was a good thing too. One of the students showed up late to class, and was instructed to take the first empty seat. If Harry wasn't surrounded on both sides, he might have had to sit next to Draco Malfoy for the entire 70 minute class.

Professor Flitwick didn't show them any new incantations or wand methods that first day, but did describe a few of the new charms they would be learning. The time before Christmas holidays apparently was dedicated to common household charms. Harry realized that many of them he either already knew, or had learned advanced versions of. So far he had one class down, which didn't look to be so bad.

After lunch, Harry headed to the familiar DADA classroom, with both Hermione and Ron in tow. No one had yet seen the new teacher, but they were about to find out. Just like in Charms class, all four houses were accounted for in the large classroom. With pleasure, Harry noted that most of the students were all DA members. Slytherin house only had three students present, none of which was Draco. Ron's day was looking up.

Professor Ruthesis Rofordit stepped out of the attached office just as the final bell rang. Or rather, she crawled out. It took almost two whole minutes for her to get to her desk at the front of the room, and then another five to go through roll call. She was ancient!

"Crikie! She must be as old as Dumbledore!" Ron whispered in Harry's ear. "Now I know where I've seen her name before. She's on one of the plaques in the Trophy Room. I must have polished it a dozen times over the years."

"Yes, I remember her now too." Hermione put in her two cents. "She was Dumbledore's first appointed professor of DADA when he became headmaster. She retired years ago. Ron, I bet she might have even taught your parents."

Similar discussions were passing around the room in quiet waves, and Professor Rofordit didn't seem to hear any of it. After roll call she went over the syllabus just as Flitwick did, and then she instructed all

the students to read the first chapter in their books. Harry did as told, but was becoming concerned that the class was beginning too much like the previous year.

Twenty minutes later, when the class had finished its assigned reading, Rofordit stood up and came to the front of the room. She addressed the class.

"I'm sure most of ya have heard by now that it's been many years since my last Defense Against the Arts class. In truth, it's been 37 years. I taught this subject for eleven years, and before that I was an auror for almost 50. So, it's more than apparent I'm not exactly a spring chicken anymore." This earned a polite chuckle from most of the students.

"However, even though I'm not at the top of my game anymore, I have years experience that I can share with ya. We're in some troubled times right now, and the future doesn't look any brighter. That's the only reason why I agreed to come back to teach once again. It's a special favor for Dumbledore, so you'd be wise to listen to what I have to say. There's some spice to this old gal yet."

The class laughed again more earnestly. Maybe she wouldn't be so bad after all.

"We'll dismiss class early today, so ya can get a head start on your homework. I want 18 inches describing your previous professors in this subject, and what they've taught you. It's due next Monday at the start of class. But before you go, let's have a short duel. Raise your hand if ya think you can beat me in a simple friendly duel? I'll give 50 house points to anyone who manages."

The class broke out into excited whispers. 50 points! That was a lot of points to be offered. In fact, the only person to ever award so many points at once had been Dumbledore, during the End of Year Feast. A few looked like they wanted to try against their new professor, but most remained quiet. All the DA members gave looks to Harry, but he didn't raise his hand. Privately, he thought he might be able to beat Rofordit. He had no doubt she knew more spells than he did, but Harry figured that by moving quickly and never giving her time to rest,

he might be able to best the older woman. Still, he hardly knew anything about her, and he wanted to see her in action before he tried a duel.

When nobody raised their hand, Professor Rofordit gave an eerie grin. The wrinkled skin and age spots marring her face gave her a frightening look.

“What the matter? Nobody thinks they can beat an old woman? I’m over a hundred years older than ya! Surely someone wants to try for so many points?”

It looked like no one would, but then a person in the front of the room raised their hand. Harry couldn’t see who it was until he stood up, but then he knew. It was Zacharias Smith, the Hufflepuff from the DA.

“Alright now! We finally got someone with some hair on their chest.” Rofordit praised Smith for stepping forward. “Tell you what. Just this once, for volunteering first, I’ll give ya 5 points for the effort.”

The rest of the class watched in anticipation as Rofordit magicked all the desks and chairs against the walls, and ushered the class behind a protective barrier. That way, only Smith and herself would be in danger of getting hit by a stray curse. Since the duel wasn’t an official one, they didn’t bother conjuring a regulation sized dueling platform. Instead, she explained that the whole area could be used, furniture and all. Harry knew that could be a huge advantage for someone with transfiguration skills like himself, but doubted Smith had any practice like that. Rofordit probably had though.

Finally the duel started. At first, neither Smith nor Rofordit made a move. In fact, Rofordit hadn’t even drawn her wand yet. Two of the Slytherins in the back were placing wagers on who would win, but Harry didn’t know how it was possible to; without having seen them fight before.

Smith threw the first curse; a disarming spell that Rofordit easily side stepped. Harry inwardly swore. The DA students would probably be awfully rusty if they couldn’t remember to never begin a duel with a

disarming spell. Smith should have cast some simple charms instead to gauge Rofordit's speed and maneuverability.

In retaliation, Rofordit just stood there and smiled. She had ample time to cast something in return, but let the opportunity pass. Smith didn't seem to notice, as he cast a second spell, this time a stunner.

Rofordit again side stepped the light beam, never even drawing her wand. The two combatants stood about thirty feet apart from each other, with nothing in between, and neither one made a move to get any closer. Harry could tell that Smith was getting frustrated with Rofordit. More than half of the spells Hogwarts students learned were defensive spells, and Rofordit was decisively taking them out of Smith's arsenal by not attacking.

The next volley of spells that Smith cast were more up to par with what Harry had taught him the year before. In quick succession, he cast a leg locking curse, *Furnunculus* (which causes boils), and a strong *Flipendo* curse. The most affective of these was the *Flipendo*, which could possibly knock out an opponent. The other two were just annoyances. Smith's hope, as Harry had taught him, was that in the process of dodging or blocking the *Flipendo*, his opponent wouldn't have time to avoid the others.

So it surprised everyone when Rofordit easily countered all three. She actually stepped into the path of the leg locking curse, while stepping out of the way of the *Furnunculus* spell. The *Flipendo* would have hit her straight on, but while moving forward, she finally drew her wand to cast a simple protection shield. The leg locker curse hit her full on just after the *Flipendo* was reflected, but half a second later, she had cast the counter charm and was back in fighting form.

After that, the match didn't last much longer. Smith had lost confidence after the failed multi-spell attack, and had resorted to dueling like a second year. He cast one failed spell after another, and Rofordit countered, dodged, or blocked it each time. The only offensive spell she cast was her last one, which successfully disarmed Smith. Six minutes after the duel had begun, Zacharias had dropped his guard while strategizing, and had forgotten that his opponent had chosen not to attack, rather than being prevented from

doing so. When he dropped his guard, Rofordit pounced on the opportunity, and struck before Smith even had a chance to defend himself. The match was over.

After all the desks were returned to their normal positions, and the class had retaken their seats, she congratulated Smith on his performance.

“Good job Smith, especially being the first one to try. Ya started out a little shaky, but that one burst of spells would have worked against a less experienced fighter. After that though, you got discouraged. Ya wanted me to attack ya, and it was plainly written on your face. So I simply stood there until ya dropped your guard. Can you think of anything else ya did wrong?”

Zacharias thought for a moment, and then spoke. “I shouldn’t have started out with a disarming spell, and I shouldn’t have let you tire me out so quickly. I used up all my energy casting one useless spell after another. I should have taken my time thinking up more combinations instead of just casting random spells.”

Professor Rofordit agreed with Smith. “Right ya are. The reason why it’s bad to start out any duel, be it a friendly one or a fightn’ one, with a disarming spell is that it’s too expected. It’s the obvious choice, so everyone always expects it. You might get lucky every once in a while, but not often. And the time it takes to cast, gives your opponent time to cast something more dangerous. For example, if ya cast Expelliarmus, and I cast a Reductor Curse, and they both hit, what would happen? You’d have a hole in your chest, and I’d just have to spend a moment picking my wand up off the ground. Expelliarmus should only be used when your opponent is on the defensive or tired, or when you’re certain that he won’t be able to get to his wand again.

“As for randomly casting spells without thinking, yes, it was wrong in this instance. But sometimes it can be the right strategy. Anyone know when?”

Harry was the only one to raise his hand. He didn’t know if he would normally know the answer, but this one he had read in the auror’s handbook he had picked up over the summer.

"Mr. Potter, is it? I expected ya to be a little taller." Rofordit's comment gained a round of chuckles around the class. "What do ya think?"

"You can successfully cast random spells when your opponent is on the defensive." Harry explained. "Instead of giving them time to regroup or form a plan of attack, keep them moving by not letting up in your assault. Meanwhile, while you're casting random spells, you can think of a new strategy, or try to maneuver your opponent into a compromising position."

Rofordit might have been impressed, but she didn't show it.

"Very good Mr. Potter, five points to Gryffindor. I see someone hasn't let the lack of decent defense teachers get in the way of their education. That's it for today. Next week, someone else can have a go for those 50 points. I'll challenge students once a week until I get beat, or until ya all give up. Class dismissed."

The rest of the day, while Hermione and to a lesser extent the others, began their first homework assignments, Harry made posters and sign up sheets advertising the new DA meetings. Students from any house and any year were able to join, but final membership was still decided on by Harry. He hoped that Malfoy and his stooges wouldn't be dumb enough to attempt to join. It was obvious that if they did, it was only to spy on the group and try to disrupt their meetings. Other than them, Harry didn't have any problems with any others joining. He did want to keep the DA down to a manageable number though. So on the posters and sign up sheets, Harry placed a limit on the number of students that could join. Fifty in each group sounded about right to him. It was more than he had had before, but with the additional help of Remus, Harry figured that would be alright. So the thirty or so students in the advanced DA would get a boost in numbers, and the novice group would start out strong. Harry didn't know how popular the groups would be, but the goal he set of seven students in each year from each house, in both groups, sounded reasonable.

Because he couldn't get into the other three common rooms to post the sign up sheets, Harry made a trip down into his trunk's living

quarters that night before curfew. While they didn't work for the castle anymore, Dobby and Winky still knew their way around, and could be of some use. Luckily they were in their own quarters, and appreciated the work Harry offered them. The past few days had left them quite bored.

On the way back out of his trunk, Harry ran into his double. When Harry had made the trip to Hogwarts, he had stopped time traveling temporarily to get accustomed to his new schedule. By the week's end however, he must have felt ready to start up again. The odd thing though, other than there being a perfect copy of himself standing two feet away, was that there was only one double, not two. For the past many months, Harry had got used to seeing three versions of himself. Having only two left him feeling naked in a way.

"Hey, aren't we missing someone?" The original Harry asked his future self.

"Nope." He replied. "You decided that while at school, you didn't need to push yourself so hard. So we'll only be traveling once each week from now on. Monday nights at eight o'clock, we go back six days. The current us will worry about classes, the DA, Quidditch practices, prefect patrols, and so on, while the future version of us will keep up with advanced training, and do all our homework for next week. Trust me, it works out great. And boy, are you in for an exciting week!"

The future Harry laughed at his own joke, whatever it was. Harry hated when his future selves hinted at something that would happen in the future, but wouldn't tell him what it was. He always had to wait until it happened to find out what was so funny.

The other Harry wouldn't say anything more, so they made their goodbyes and turned in for the night after their daily meditation. The real Harry in his four poster bed in the Gryffindor dormitory, and the future version of himself stretched out in the luxurious sleigh bed inside his magical trunk.



Tuesday passed as quickly as possible. Again, like everyday during the week, Harry only had one class in the morning, and one in the afternoon.

Transfiguration with Hermione in the morning was pleasant, and Harry was pleased with the level of success he was able to cast his spells with. The practice Dobby and Winky had given him during the summer had helped tremendously, and Harry was consistently one of the top five students to finish his transformations correctly. The total class size was smaller than both DADA and Charms had been, but it was still substantial; perhaps twenty students. Draco Malfoy was one, but fortunately Professor McGonagall never let him get away with his usual snide remarks and insults.

Hermione and Harry had both finished the last exercise early, and had time to talk the last ten minutes of class. They had been working on cross species transfiguration, and Hermione spent most of the time congratulating Harry on his improvement. He had even almost beat her once, although just barely. That's what made Hermione suspicious. It was well known that Hermione was the best Transfiguration student in their year; possibly even in the whole school. Beating her was no mere feat. Harry laughed the whole thing off, again reminding his noisy friend that he had done nothing but read ahead and practice all summer long. Grudgingly, Hermione bought his excuse. Privately, Harry thought she was just upset that she might no longer be the top transfiguration student.

Arithmancy was his afternoon class, and Harry was nearly late because he had never been to the classroom before. If he had been smarter he would have left early to try and find it, but Professor Snape had caught him in the hallway right after lunch. He demanded to know how Harry had posted DA sign up sheets in the Slytherin common room, and why they wouldn't come down.

Harry had asked Dobby and Winky to use a permanent sticking charm in the dungeon, like the one the portrait of Mrs. Black used, but he didn't tell Snape that. Instead, he just said that he had one of the students post it there for him, but couldn't remember who it was. He didn't know anything about a permanent sticking charm!

Snape was miffed, but could do nothing without proof, so eventually let Harry go. He did hint though, that the Potions lesson tomorrow morning would be particularly painful. Harry wasn't surprised.

Unlike his NEWT level classes, Arithmancy was a fifth year level class, so it wasn't comprised of students from all four houses. Instead only two houses filled the seats; Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Harry had never had a class with only Ravenclaw students before, but that wasn't surprising. Each year had a random lottery to decide which houses would share their classes, and Ravenclaw and Gryffindor had never been paired together in Harry's year. In the past, his group had always been matched with Hufflepuff for Herbology and Astronomy, and Slytherin for Potions and CoMC. The rest of his subjects had been Gryffindor house alone.

The only student Harry knew in the strange classroom was Ginny Weasley, so he made his way over to her and asked if the empty seat was taken. It wasn't, so she smiled and offered it to him.

Harry should have known better; that Ginny would have been in the class, but it had slipped his mind. After the trio's horrible experience in Divination, he, Hermione, and Ron had all warned the younger girl to stay far away from Trelawney, and take another elective. At first Ginny had wanted to take Muggle Studies, but changed her mind at the last moment. Her older brother Charlie had taken Muggle Studies when he was in school, and whenever home, he was endlessly questioned by their fascinated father. Ginny preferred some free time during her holidays, so she decided to take Arithmancy her third year. It might not be as much fun as another choice, but at least she could ask Hermione for help with her homework.

Unlike his other classes, Harry found that he was far ahead in the subject matter when it came to Arithmancy. He wasn't joking when he had written McGonagall saying that he would be ready for NEWT level classes when the summer ended. Harry thought he was even beyond a sixth year experience. Besides perhaps potions, Arithmancy was the subject he studied most during the summer. Harry had already made some progress on his personalized stunner spell, and thought it might be ready before his Halloween deadline. It

was things like that he studied in his free time, while everyone else was off to their extra classes.

Because the class came so easy for him, Harry went about his work quickly, and then worked on his own formulas. The first day of class became a pattern for how the professor liked to work, and Harry soon discovered that every class would follow the same schedule.

The first twenty minutes or so would have the teacher, Professor Vector, lecturing about the assigned reading, and answering any questions the students might have. Then she would assign a few equations to work out, followed by an advanced one for extra credit. All the work would be collected before class ended, and anything that wasn't completed was to be finished by next class, in addition to the assigned reading.

As he didn't have many questions for Professor Vector during the first part of class, Harry usually started work on the day's equations, so he finished well before anybody else. Then, for the remainder of class, he worked on his personal stunner, or anything else he fancied. As long as he remained quiet and the work stayed on paper, no one knew the difference. Harry almost thought of the class as a study hall for him. When class ended, he turned in his work just like everybody else, and left without Professor Vector never knowing the difference.

"Harry, wait up!"

Harry was so occupied with keeping his extra work private, that he had run from the room, totally forgetting that Ginny was right behind him. It was rather rude, and Harry apologized.

"Sorry Ginny, I forgot you were there for a second." Ooops, that sounded bad. "I mean, I was so involved with the work, I just got stuck in my head. What's up?"

If Ginny was insulted, she didn't show it. "I just wanted to talk about tonight's prefect patrol with you. Hermione says we have to meet the earlier shift in the Great Hall at exactly midnight. I figured we could meet up a little early, so we wouldn't be rushed."

"Sounds good." Harry agreed. "How about we meet in the common room at 11:30, and then walk down together. I'll bring the Marauder's Map too, so we'll have an easy time keeping watch."

Ginny thought that a fabulous idea. The Marauder's Map would let them do virtually anything they wanted, and still be able to patrol the hallways for unauthorized names. They could just sit in a hallway all night long, and not have to worry about patrolling.

"I bet we get loads of opportunity to break up some snogging or something; using that map. Fred and George will be so jealous!"

Harry remembered that the Map had originally belonged to the twins, but didn't take the time to remind Ginny of it. In truth, he didn't know if she knew. And he didn't want to get his business partners in trouble, so Harry didn't risk it.

"How about we wait to see what happens?" Harry asked. "I don't want to be known as a killjoy throughout the whole school. Besides, we'll seem like peeping toms if we manage to interrupt every snogging session. Let's wait to see who we catch out of bed first."

Ginny gave in, and the two parted on the fifth floor. Harry was heading back to Gryffindor tower, but Ginny still had another class to attend.

The actual patrol route wasn't as fun as the two thought it would be. Since it was both their first time, they didn't know that the first week back to school, the only thing they could expect to find was Mrs. Norris and a few dead rats. It seemed that because the prefect patrol route had just been reintroduced, no students were willing to risk being caught so early in the year. In a few weeks, maybe, but not so soon after being warned about extra security.

Harry and Ginny spent the two hours roaming the hallways with no particular path in mind. Because of the map, it was impossible for them to get lost, even if they didn't recognize that part of the castle. They talked about many things, mostly about their first days of class, and about the upcoming Quidditch season. Besides them, only Ron would be a returning member. The two beaters they had found after

Fred and George were banned, Sloper and Kirke, both decided that watching the sport was more enjoyable than playing it, and had let Harry and the team know they weren't coming back. McGonagall was happy enough, but that left the team in an even tighter spot than before. Instead of three spots, now they had to replace five instead. Four if you counted Ginny as a chaser, which wasn't guaranteed. A few times the two came across a team of aurors who were likewise roaming the castle, but other than that, they were left alone. The aurors, they were informed, wouldn't always patrol alongside the prefects. They would do random patrolling from their posts outside the school grounds, but would most of the time stay out of sight.

2 am finally rolled around, although Harry wished it wouldn't. Not because patrolling with Ginny was so great. If anything, Harry was getting a little tired of talking Quidditch strategy. The Weasley's never gave up! But instead, Harry didn't want the night to end because once he fell asleep, the morning would follow. And the following morning, Harry had his first Potions lesson with Snape. Arghhh!

Harry's bad mood continued into breakfast, where he hardly ate anything. Hermione was busy with her nose in a book, but Ron noticed Harry not eating, because the two often competed to see who could eat the most strips of bacon. The standing record was 37, held by Ron.

"What's the matter Harry? You've hardly touched your food?"

Harry took a moment to grab his napkin and wipe his shirt clean of the mess Ron had just sprayed on it, and then threw it back on the table. Any other day he would have made a joke about Ron's eating habits, but wasn't in the mood today.

"Got Potions with Snape after breakfast. I'm just not looking forward to it, is all. I swore to myself that I wouldn't take any of his crap this year, and he's already been really hard on me so far. Yesterday he even threatened me; saying that class was going to be particularly painful. I just don't know how to handle him anymore. I'm not going to sit back and let him insult me, but I can't just get up and walk out of the room either"

"Why not? I'd love to see the look on his face if you did. It would almost be worth showing up to that class to see." Ron made the joke as he shoveled another forkful of eggs into his mouth. "That's one great thing about these remedial classes. No Snape! I might actually learn something in potions this year. God knows Snape's never taught us anything useful before. If it weren't for Hermione, I'd never have even gotten this far."

Harry agreed with every word that Ron said, but none of it was useful to him. He still had to go and face down his most hated professor, and in less than fifteen minutes. "At least," Harry thought, "we haven't had our first Occulmency lesson yet. I don't even plan on showing up tomorrow night. That will really put him in a foul mood!"

The schedule he had gotten from McGonagall Sunday morning had two nightly sessions blocked out with Snape, which were obviously intended for Occulmency lessons. Harry had no intentions of showing up, as no one had even asked him whether he wanted the classes or not. Even if he had been asked, Harry didn't need the extra study any more. Dumbledore could testify to that! And if Snape had any problems with Harry not showing up, Harry could show him his proficiency just as easily as he had shown the Headmaster.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry was seated as far back as possible in the smelly potions dungeon, with only Hermione and Lavender as his fellow Gryffindors. This class was his smallest yet, having only fourteen students. Not surprisingly, Draco Malfoy was present, as were Crabbe and Goyle. Those two were surprising. There was no way they could have qualified for NEWT level Potions on their own merits.

"This year," Professor Snape began a second after the bell rung, "will prove to be more difficult than you could possibly imagine. I doubt that half of you have the potion skills to correctly brew even the simplest tonic on my agenda this year. In fact, I don't understand how many of you even managed to convince your OWL examiners that you possess the knowledge required for NEWT level Potions." Snape was intently staring at Harry as he said this. The underlying content wasn't lost on the class. Harry turned red in frustration, and Malfoy's

snicker could be heard clear across the room, but Harry didn't rise to Snape's bait.

"How about you, Potter? Do you have any idea how it is that a student with an obvious lack of skills could have qualified for this class?" The jab was made at him, but Harry neatly turned it around to insult Snape.

"I don't know Professor." Harry said as he stared directly at Crabbe and Goyle. "I guess any student could have gotten in with the right faculty involvement. Personally, I think it reflects poorly on the rest of the staff, when one professor favors students in their own house over others. Assuming that the professor is a head of house, of course."

Malfoy's sneers came to a dramatic end as he shot daggers at Harry. He had to, because Crabbe and Goyle were too dumb to do it on their own behalf. Malfoy's glares were nothing however, compared to the icy cold look coming from Snape.

"Ten points from Gryffindor Potter! For your judgmental view of our faculty. Who are you to question your professors?"

It wasn't fair by a long shot, but Harry knew that arguing would only result in a further loss of points. So he remained quiet, and was rewarded by a diversion of Snape's attention. Harry thought that Snape didn't want to give him another chance to trade insults again. Harry wasn't the timid eleven year old boy he once was. He could give as well as he got these days, and Snape knew it.

After a few more soft insults against Harry and Gryffindors in general, Snape finally got around to the day's lesson. They were to brew Skele-Gro for Madame Pomfrey, as the sixth years did every year at the beginning of term. Although the potion was only sold publicly by one company, Rubens Winikus Inc., Snape explained that the school had special authorization to brew the potion because the original inventor had been a Hogwarts professor at the time. Harry was alarmed at first to discover that the potion he had consumed in second year was brewed by students, but was put at ease by the fact that the potion had worked. Harry thought he might even have an

advantage over the others, as he remembered the color and smell of the final potion.

There were an odd number of students in each house, so partnering up took some time. The odd Slytherin chose Terry Boot in Ravenclaw to share a desk with, and after apologizing to Hermione for leaving her with Lavender, Harry went to approach the lone Susan Bones from Hufflepuff. The Slytherins greatly outnumbered the other houses, so no one was feeling very comfortable.

Harry and Susan working as a team proved to be more beneficial than either thought would. Harry, who gained plenty experience with a knife at having to serve the Dursleys their meals for so many years, prepared all the ingredients for the cauldron. Susan, who didn't like the actual handling of the ingredients, gratefully maintained the fire temperature, and stirred the formula when needed. That Harry had never had patience for, as he was always confusing directions and the difference between a swirl and a stir. Only in the quiet confines of his private potions room could Harry concentrate enough to do both jobs.

The one problem Harry had, was when he began the potion and put on his black bandana. He hadn't had opportunity yet to wear it outside of exercising, but with the cauldron smoke and intense heat, Harry wanted to keep his hair out of his face.

"What's the matter Potter? School uniform regulations not good enough for the famous likes of you?" Snape hadn't missed a beat of the new cloth on Harry's head.

But Harry had been prepared for this. He had expected Snape to make fun of him the very day he had bought the bandana back in June, and had been through every school rulebook to make sure there wasn't a code somewhere that the potions master could take advantage of.

"Sorry Professor." Harry answered. "I like to wear a bandana when I work with potions. It keeps my hair from getting oily."

Many spoons and measured beakers clicked hard on the stone tabletops as every student stopped what they were doing to gawk at Harry. Sure, everyone knew that Snape had greasy hair. Even the Slytherins joked about it. But no one said anything! It was almost taboo.

“Take that ridiculous rag off you head this instant, Potter! And ten points off Gryffindor for being insubordinate!”

“I didn’t mean to offend you Professor Snape.” Harry apologized. “I wasn’t even talking about you. But you’re the one who brought up uniform regulations. I looked through them, and it says that in lieu of a wizarding hat, which is cumbersome and possibly flammable, students can wear appropriate headwear as long as it doesn’t impeach another’s learning. I don’t see a problem with my bandana interfering with anyone else, so I don’t really see a problem. But if I’ve overlooked another rule which you know off, then I’ll gladly take it off. Just let me know which rule it is so I can read into it more clearly. I wouldn’t want to break any others.”

Snape was besides himself with rage, but there was nothing he could do without having Harry break any rules; besides taking another 15 points off Gryffindor for being a know-it-all, which he gladly did. After that, Snape locked himself in his office during the remainder of class, no doubt researching school uniform regulations.

“Gee Harry, thanks!” At Susan’s odd statement, Harry asked her what she meant by it. She explained. “Well, with you in class, Professor Snape hasn’t even looked at me or any of the other Hufflepuffs. Ravenclaws neither. It looks like with you in class, the rest of us don’t have to worry about his bad temper anymore.”

She couldn’t have been more right, as Harry leaned during his second potions lesson Friday afternoon. Wednesday afternoon and Thursday were just a repeat of Charms, Transfiguration, and DADA classes. All interesting, but with no real new progress. Friday morning was another uneventful day in Arithmancy, but potions class proved to be nothing but eventful. By dinner, the whole school was talking about it.

"Last lesson," Snape began, "you all attempted to brew Skele-Gro. Not many succeeded. But who am I to say? So to see which of your potions work properly, and which of them fail, I've decided that one person from each team will test their own potion to judge the effects for themselves. We'll begin with you, Potter. I believe you have some experience with this formula, do you not?"

It was downright dirty, and Harry wasn't going to stand for it. But before he could say anything, Hermione stood and voiced her own opinion.

"But Professor Snape, you can't! The potion is supposed to taste awful, and hurt something fierce. Besides, no one is missing any bones. What's going to happen to someone who drinks the potion, but doesn't need it?"

"I don't know Miss Granger, but I suspect it will greatly hurt." Was Snape's cold reply. "Now sit down and do not interrupt me again. Five points from Gryffindor! Say any more, and you'll be the first volunteer."

Hermione had more to say, but held back. As she quickly retook her seat, she sent an apologetic look to Harry. She didn't see a way out of him having to drink the potion. But Harry did.

"So now we'll begin. I think I will remove a bone or two from you after all Mr. Potter. I have a special spell in mind that will do just that. Which would you rather have removed? Your pelvis, or the thing you call your backbone?" Snape was playing to his Slytherin students now. He never could pass up a chance to grandstand in front of his masses.

"No." Harry simply said.

"No to the pelvis, or no to the backbone?" Asked Snape. Apparently, he hadn't understood Harry.

"No to the whole thing, Professor. I don't think it's fair or proper to make us test such a dangerous potion. And I certainly won't let you

perform unneeded surgery on me. Been there, done that. So thank you for the offer, but no."

The class gasped at Harry's point blank refusal, but he did see a masked look of pride on Hermione and Susan's faces. He was doing what all the students wanted to do; stand up to Snape.

"I don't care what you want, Potter!" Snape was livid, but his voice remained oddly quiet and controlled. "This is my classroom, and as long as you're in it, you'll do as I say, whether you want to or not." Snape reached into his left sleeve for what the class assumed was his wand, but he never got the chance to use it. Harry beat him to it.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry didn't know who was more stunned; the class who had never seen an attack on a professor before, or the teacher who was frozen in place; eyes silently cursing their attacker. Once the full implication of his actions set in, Draco and his goons stood up to defend their head of house, but Harry already had his wand drawn, and was ready for them. Quickly he disarmed them, and told them to sit back down with authority. With the class's attention glued to his every move, Harry got out from behind his desk, and slowly approached Professor Snape. Currently, he was leaning against the chalkboard off to the side of the room.

"Harry!" Hermione pleaded with him from somewhere in the back. "What are you doing? You'll be expelled for attacking a professor!"

Harry shook his head as he continued his slow walk towards Snape. "Dumbledore won't expel me, and Snape knows that. Besides, Snape was reaching for his own wand; we all saw it. I was only defending myself. It wasn't like I caused the man to drink a potion that would cause unnecessary pain, I only petrified him. Isn't that right, Professor?" By now Harry had reached his goal, and was standing just a few inches from the frozen wizard.

"You'll get yours for this, Potter! You don't think Professor Snape will let you get away with this, do you." Harry was still facing away from the class, but the drawl could only come from one person.

"I don't expect to get away from this without being punished, Draco. But I won't be punished by a man who clearly plays favorites. And I won't serve any detentions either only to have to sit through hours of listening to him insult me and my family. I warned you on the train to stay away from me and my friends, Draco. Now, I'm warning Snape. Teach potions, cheer for Slytherin in Quidditch matches; do whatever you like. But stay out of my way, and leave the personal comments out of the classroom."

Harry turned his attention back to Malfoy and the class. "I earned my OWL score, unlike some people, even with his blatant favoritism over the past five years. I've a right to be here. I don't think I should have to listen to his insults every time I come down here. McGonagall doesn't try to embarrass you every moment she gets, does she? So I don't care if I get in trouble proving my point, as long as he isn't the one punishing me. So I'll punish myself, I guess. How about, 100 points from Gryffindor, and a week's worth of detentions, to be served with Mr. Filch. That sounds about fair, doesn't it?"

Harry turned around to see the class's reaction, and they all nodded their heads except for Malfoy. Even the other Slytherin students thought a week's detention with Filch plus 100 points was more than fair. Not even Snape would have done any worse.

"OK then. I'm a prefect, so I can take 25 points off myself at once. Draco, Hermione, Susan? You're all prefects. Would you take another 25 points off me as well. That way everything will be fair, and legal as well."

The others didn't know what to say or do, so they complied with Harry by way of not having any other options. Regardless of the fact that a teacher was present, Harry was clearly in charge.

Punishment taken care off, Harry got back in Snape's face and spoke quietly so only the professor could hear him.

"I refuse to sit and take your abuse any more. Lighten up, or everyday will be like this. I'm a damn good potions student if given the chance, and you know it; otherwise I wouldn't be here. So stop bellyaching

about whatever happened in the past and teach potions. Do that, and we'll get along just fine."

Harry turned back to the class, and approached Hermione. He summoned his school bag as he gave her Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's wands. "I'm going to see Professor Dumbledore, to tell him what's happened. Once I leave, wait a few minutes and unfreeze Snape. Tell him that I'll be waiting in the Headmaster's office if he feels the need to discuss this further."

Throwing his bag over his shoulder, Harry walked out of the potions room for the very last time. After that day, he was banned for life from Professor Snape's classroom.

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After the debacle that happened in the Headmaster's office late Friday afternoon, Harry retired early to spend some time training with his double, and getting ready for the next day's press conference. He had gotten a Ministry owl days before confirming that all arrangement were taken care off, and that the conference would start promptly at 11 am. Professor McGonagall had arranged for Hagrid to escort him to Hogsmeade, and keep watch while in town. None of the other staff could, because it wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend, and they all had summer homework to grade.

For the occasion, Harry decided to dress the part. Instead of his normal black school robes, or even his colorful everyday robes, he wore his black dress robes at his double's suggestion. The ones with a white phoenix embroidered on the back. Next to his fellow students, Harry would have felt overdressed and out of place. But next to whatever colorful getup Fudge was bound to wear, Harry thought that the outfit would be fine.

A stage had been erected in the middle of town, with seats for himself, the Minister, and the Ministry's "crack team of investigator" headed by Percy Weasley. A good sized crowd had turned out too; much larger than the population of Hogsmeade. Harry recognized many local shop owners in the crowd, as well as correspondent from all the major news sources. The WWW, the Dailey Prophet, Witch Weekly;

they were all there. Rita Skeeter herself had a frontline seat, and she and Harry shared a polite nod to each other. The article she had published last year had done wonders for patching up both her relationship with Harry, and her reporting reputation as well. Tomorrow, Harry had no doubt that she would be one of the most sought after reporters in the wizarding world.

Molly and Arthur Weasley were also in the crowd, further back, along with sons Bill and Charlie. Harry didn't know if they were present to show support for him or Percy, but he knew that either way, he couldn't avoid another conversation with him. Mr. Weasley practically had to hold down his wife to prevent her from jumping on stage and assaulting Harry with a bear hug.

After too much lobbying and taken photo opportunities, Minister Fudge finally made his way to the podium to begin the ceremony. "Today we are gathered here for many reasons, the most important of which is to update the public on the recently discovered threat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and his army of Death Eaters.

"Two months ago, Ministry officials responded to a call that a fight had broken out in the Ministry lobby when the building was supposed to be empty. When aurors and myself showed up to investigate, we were shocked to find numerous wizards engaged in a firefight, with none other than Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter, and You-Know-Who at the middle of the action. It took weeks of intense investigation, but a special task force compromised of my hand selected staff has finally published their findings. It has been discovered that a number of Death Eaters, previously escaped from Azkaban, gained illegal entry into the Ministry building that night to attempt to steal a prized prophecy highly sought after by their master. Since his resurrection, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has remained in a weakened, fragile condition. The prophecy he seeks supposedly has information that will return him to his full strength; something we dearly want to avoid at all costs."

Harry was squirming in his seat as he was forced to endure the utter nonsense coming from the Minister's mouth. Where did he come up with this stuff? Voldemort in a weakened state? If that were true, why's he such a threat?

"Miles away, Harry Potter learned of the plan by an owl sent to him to taunt him with the truth. When he tried to warn his teachers and Hogwart's personal, he was largely ignored by the incompetent staff. Former Headmistress Delores Umbridge is still under investigation for here alleged abuse of power while in office. So proving that he truly belongs in Gryffindor house, Harry Potter made his why to Ministry headquarters by riding an untamed Thestreal commandeered in the Forbidden Forrest. Through his brave and selfless efforts, Mr. Potter was able to delay the Death Eaters long enough for a rescue team put together by the Ministry to show up and properly combat the enemy. After a brutal battle which eventually involved Albus Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Be-named himself, the Death Eaters were finally beaten. All but one were recaptured, and I'm proud to say that through clear communication and team effort, not one of the brave souls fighting on our side suffered any serious injuries. The prophecy was kept out of enemy hands, partly due to the efforts of Harry Potter."

Fudge paused in his trash speech long enough to let the crowd cheer in response. Harry almost ran up to the podium to scream "What about Sirius?" in Fudge's face, but managed to restrain himself. Harry noticed the Weasley's, who also knew the truth, looked just as ill as he did. He gave Bill a half smile that they could both appreciate.

"That moves us on to our second order of business today. In appreciation for his heroic act, and his continuing defiance of the very man who orphaned him years ago, today I have the distinct honor of awarding the Order of Merlin, Third Class, to none other than the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter. We've had our differences in the past, but I'm proud to say that in contrast to falsely reported arguments, Mr. Potter and myself have been working hand in hand to bring down the last remaining, but few in number, Death Eaters, and eventually the weakened man they serve. Harry Potter, please step forward."

Harry eagerly rose from his seat and stepped towards the podium, if only to stop the man from further embarrassing himself. Fudge motioned Harry to stand besides him at the podium, and Harry did.

"By the power entitled to me as Minister of Magic by the International Conference of Wizards, I, Cornelius Fudge, bestow the Order of Merlin, Third Class, on you Harry Potter."

The crowd applauded wildly as they all leapt to their feet. Except for the Weasleys and Hagrid, who were still confused as to why Harry was letting Fudge get away with such nonsense, every seat in the house was showing full support for the Minister and his false words. The medal itself was placed in a velvet lined wood box that Fudge proudly thrust towards Harry's chest, but didn't let go of until a few pictures had been taken by photographers. When he finally let go, Harry held the box close to his chest, and studied it closely. There was the expected medal on a fine gold chain, as well as a lapel pin, and a wax seal with the official Order of Merlin logo on it. It really was an impressive set.

"Harry, would you like to say a few words?" This was perhaps the only genuine thing Fudge had ever said to him. How could he refuse?

"Thank you Minister." Harry said into the magical equivalence of a microphone. Fudge moved fully out of the way to let Harry have the floor, and Harry took full advantage. Before he really began though, a high pitched screech sounded in the distance. All eyes, not just Harry's, turned their heads to the offending noise. High above them all, rapidly closing the distance between herself and her master, was none other than Hedwig. She had changed a lot in the week since he had seen her last; she had fully regained her plumage. If possible, she looked even more impressive than the first time he laid eyes on her.

The crowd responded with "ohhs" and "ahhs", as many had never seen a phoenix before, let alone a white one. The crowd was even more surprised when Hedwig alighted on Harry's offered shoulder. Fudge in the background was positively glowing. The extra publicity of him being in league with someone with a white phoenix was no doubt going through his head.

He privately greeted Hedwig, but Harry made no other acknowledgement of her presence. He continued.

"As I was saying, thank you Minister Fudge, for the honor of having the chance to accept such a prestigious award. However, considering the utmost lack of respect I hold for you, and the fact that the story you just told is complete rubbish, I must refuse. Your administration has told lies for far too long. I'm here today to tell the public what really happened."

The beaming look on Minister Cornelius Fudge was no more. All throughout the crowd, whispers broke out about what was really happening. Charlie Weasley's face was a sight of pure ecstasy; he was positively cracking up. Even Hagrid was laughing, and his loud boom carried over the quiet crowd. Boy, were they in for a shocker!

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AUTHOR NOTES:

This is going to be a long note, as I have a lot to say. First off, congratulations to those who caught my huge mistake last chapter. Indeed, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny never saw Sirius die, so it's impossible for them to see a Thestral. My bad. Since then I've gone back and changed the last chapter, and have worked in a way to solve the problem. In actuality, it proved to be a great writing exercise, as I had to work within the confines of what I had already written. Hope everyone likes my patch work. Next, before I forget, I'd like to thank the author Aerie22 from .com for the tour of the first year students idea. It's all her. Of course I changed a few things, but she's the inspiration. Also, I'd like to apologize for taking longer than usually to update. I've been trying since Wednesday, but had been giving me problems. It kept saying that the "login area had been disabled." So, it's not my fault it took so long; sorry. What else can I say? Lots of confrontation in this chapter, that's for sure. I realize Harry being so tough, especially towards Snape and Draco, is a little out of character, but I couldn't help myself. It was too much fun to write! I hope reading it is equally enjoyable. Don't worry though, I plan on reigning in Harry in future chapters. I also know that everyone's disappointed in missing out on the Headmaster scene following the potion class. Don't worry, that will be in the next chapter. I purposely left things out of this first week, so I could go back and fill them in through the perspective of the second, future Harry. Besides his press conference

speech, the next chapter is going to show exactly how Harry spends his time the second time around. And all lose ends (Where's Dobby and Winky? What happened to Wormtail? How does Harry train? What will he say to the Weasley's?) will be addressed. I must admit unlike last chapter, this cliffhanger I left on purpose, as they're so much fun. Don't worry though, I don't plan on making a habit out of it. I'm eager to see what everyone thinks about my descriptions on the first days of class, and the new DADA professor; Rofordit. How'd the duel scene go? I think it's obvious Harry will be the one to finally beat her, but it will take awhile. For those purists out there, I know the idea of a secondary staff teaching remedial subjects is very original and is all me, but I don't care. It's not a main plot point; it's just to get Ron out of the way, and not have him deal with Snape. Besides, I think it's a possibility, and it's never discounted in cannon. For those worrying about Harry's relationship with Dumbledore, don't worry. I think it hit a high note in this chapter. From now on, each will give the other space for things to cool down, and soon they'll be on their way to reconciliation. I've got a quick challenge for any interested readers. Anyone notice the sex of newbie Loren Zabini? For that matter, what's Blaise's sex? The most conclusive evidence I've found so far, is that in the Spanish version of Harry Potter books, the publicist use the masculine form of verbs when describing the character. That's a far stretch if you ask me. I hope we find out for sure before book 7 ends. Any takers? Later, and thanks for reading.

Siripiritus – I've done that with Ron's name a few times, but I usually catch it. It happens when I write "Ron and" really fast, but accidentally type "Rona nd" instead. The spell checker goes back and adds an a to the nd, but leaves the Rona behind. If you could tell me where it happens in Ch. 12 I'd appreciated it, as I still haven't found my mistake. Regardless, glad my misspellings give you joy. I'm not much of a Ron fan either, and like any butchering he takes. If it weren't for Draco, he'd be my most hated character. The funny thing is that I don't hate him from the HP books, but from the endless number of fanfics that cast him as the diehard best friend. He's always in the way. Kill Ron, I say!

LavenderWolf – Sorry my spelling's not up to your standards, but I type so fast, I make many mistakes in the process. I have spell checker and all, but it's not fullproof. As I've said before, I have

considered using a beta or two, but the time it takes is too much in my opinion. I'd rather publish my story as is, and go back later to fix any problems. My grammar isn't so bad to leave the reader totally in the dark, after all. In a way, it's like every one of my readers is a beta. So thanks for keeping a sharp eye out, but continue to expect the same types of little errors in my writing. If you or anyone else would like to go through my already published chapters to make any corrections, I'll be glad to post changes to those. Thanks.

TuxedoMac – Glad you liked the sorting song. I still don't like parts, but I agree that overall it gets the job done. You know what? I was looking through my reviews the other day, and I noticed that you were my third review ever. Thanks for sticking around so long.

Adj – What can I say about Ron? I don't like him. You accuse me of returning him to a younger age. But I ask you, what type of emotional growth has he shown in books 4 and 5? However I feel, rather than turning him into a complete bad ass evil character, like others have done, I've chosen to keep him the same he's always been. You'll see very little character development with Ron from me. Sorry, I've just got other concerns in the story that are more important. As for Ginny checking his homework? Remember that it wasn't school assigned. Molly gave them both the work, and I'm sure she's not up on current syllabi. The work was just busywork to keep Ron occupied, and it's very possible for Ginny to check up on him. She's only checking to see if he's written complete nonsense, or has actually taken the time to put together a tangible argument.

Lauren – I'm glad you brought up the fact that Harry isn't perfect, and shouldn't be portrayed as such. Believe it or not, that's what I'm trying to do. It's hard sometimes, but I tried in the Knockturn Alley scene when he manages to lose his wand, and almost die. I also had him sloppily kick Crabbe and Goyle on the train, as opposed to performing a perfect martial arts routine. In the upcoming story, I'm going to try and make Harry seem as imperfect as possible, but he's still got to win, doesn't he? Thanks for noticing.

Josh Potter – Don't worry, I didn't take offense at your last review. Harry and Ginny will be getting involved, but very slowly, and not very far. As for the R/H, N/L you asked about? I can't tell you what my

other pairings might be, but I will say that some of the characters will be involved, and some won't. I will give the hint, that nobody will expect what will happen. I don't think a fanfic exists yet with the pairings I have in mind.

Samyjoc – That's all good to know, but I don't remember specifying what type of kick Harry used. I just said that he pivoted on his foot, and kicked the guy in the chest. If that's a roundhouse, so be it. I'm not a martial artist, so I'm trying to be as vague about the physical fighting as possible. Truthfully, I don't know how it's possible that what I described could be interpreted, because I never mentioned any types of details. But if it is indeed a roundhouse kick, and it's impossible in the scenario I described, my apologies.

Lightning Rain – Want to lose the Macarena song? How about this. "I really want to make you sweat. Sweat til you can't sweat no more. And if you cry, I'm going to push it, push it some more. A la la la la long, a la la la-la la la la long. OK!" Remember that one by Inner Circle? I hate that song, and if you remember it, now you hate me too. Man, I love doing this.

Coolpadfoot – Jeez, give me a break, would ya! Hermione and Ron have just been reintroduced into the story, and you're already talking about me showing them having no depth of character. Let me get past the first day of class, alright! I actually have read Full Pensieve's story, and like it quite much. Not to toot my own horn, but if you look on his webpage, I'm listed as one of his favorite authors. Obviously he likes my work enough to give me a chance, and that's all I ask from you. Give me another 5 chapters or so to really get into supporting characters, and then review again. After that, I'll be more receptive to a scolding.

Christ4Ever – Thanks for finally reviewing. I agree that I might have told Neville and Luna too much initially, but their positions in Harry's life are going to change in my story. And remember, Harry only told them the bare essentials on the train. He's still got other things to tell only Ron and Hermione. Want an example? Next chapter, Ron will confront Harry about his new trunk, and get a private tour. And remember how I said Harry would let Hermione borrow any book from his library? See, I don't tell Neville and Luna everything. Sorry, but

you'll just have to wait and see what Harry decides to share with others. Later, and thanks for reading.

Gooey Rod – You must be new to reading fan fiction. All these names at the bottom of my chapters aren't co-authors, they're reviews who asked questions in previous chapters. I take the time out to personally respond to some of the better ones each new update. If I had this many co-authors, I agree, the whole story could be finished in a matter of weeks. But alas, it's just lonely old me. Keep reading though, I don't plan to quit publishing before I finish.

Gotta B Writin – Thanks for the review. Believe it or not, I actually read both your stories before I even published my own, so it's a great compliment for me that you're getting reviews praising both our work. I think I wrote you a private email, but feel free to note my work in your next story. I'd be honored. I agree about some of the crazy advice we get. There was this one guy, MaidenMasherV, who wanted my Harry to get all sorts of body piercing and go a little too dark for my taste. I've seen other reviews of his around the block, and he's always suggesting that Harry get a few tattoos, learn to ride a bike, and go gang rape some bitches. A little morbid for my tastes, but to each their own. I've seen and heard it all before. We should trade some outrageous suggestions sometime. Bye.

I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving almost 100 reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

Chapter 14 – Turning Fudge & Honeydukes

As the crowd's whispers grew in volume over concern what Harry had said, he couldn't help but rest his hands on the podium and look over the crowd with a smile on his face. Harry had wanted to do this for a long time, and now he was finally getting his chance to put straight some things that the public had been misinformed about.

Fudge was getting nervous over to the side, but he couldn't very well interrupt the Boy-Who-Lived after he just got finished giving the mic up to the young wizard. Fudge may not have a problem with censoring newspaper articles and press releases, but he couldn't control what anyone said in public. Harry knew this of course, and had been planning on it since the meeting in Dumbledore's office a week ago. The fact that Harry had a magnificent white phoenix perched on his shoulder helped too. Half the crowd was still admiring Hedwig since her arrival, and wondering if she truly belonged to the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry only momentarily thought about introducing her, but decided not to. Her presence remaining mysterious would cause a much greater effect.

"With the exception of the interview I gave the Quibbler last year," Harry said loudly over the noisy crowd, "which was only to clear up events which had been improperly reported on, I've not had much contact with the wizarding public. In fact, with the exception of Hogwarts and a few Ministry officials, I don't think I've met anyone outside of brief encounters I've had while school shopping in Diagon Alley. It surprises me how much you people put pictures of me in your newspapers, and report on my actions, when you can't possibly have enough information to know even half of what goes on with my life."

"Last summer it was reported almost daily that I was an emotionally and mentally unbalanced child, whose false claims of Voldemort's return was only believed by an equally crazy and senile old man, Hogwart's Headmaster Albus Dumbledore."

If Harry thought the nine young Slytherins had reacted bad to the name, that was nothing to how the assembled crowd of over a thousand wizards and witches now reacted. The whispers and soft conversation turned to screams of fright and terror, and even the very

stage Harry stood on rocked as the Minister and his team shuttered in their seats. Even with Dumbledore's policy of always using the name Voldemort, Harry doubted it had been said to such a large crowd before.

"Please, settle down!" The crowd was still in an uproar, and could barely hear his magically amplified voice. Hedwig helped out with that by gaining everyone's attention with a short burst of Phoenix song. Once the crowd quieted, so did she. "I'm sorry if my use of his title upsets you, but I've never used the silly names you people have come up with."

This spawned its own discussion among the people, but at least now it was quiet enough for Harry to continue.

"Ever since I first met the man the summer after my second year at school, Minister Fudge has done nothing but act the pompous and foolish politician I know him to be. He's more concerned with his public image and the benefits of being Minister of Magic than what really matters; serving our people. I agreed to this press conference today not to accept any award, but to have the chance to voice my concerns, and show the public once and for all what type of man our leader really is."

Most of the people on stage looked extremely uncomfortable, and tried as much as possible to sink into the shadows. It was obvious to all that Harry was about to start a harangue against their boss, and none of the Ministry officials wanted to stand against the famous Harry Potter in such a public setting. Even Percy Weasley, whose ambition and single mindedness within the ranks of the Ministry paled to so many others, shed away from his boss as if to say, "Sorry, you're on your own with this one!"

Only Fudge was left to defend himself, which he tried to do uncertainly. As the crowd continued to sputter in indignation, Fudge nervously approached Harry's side and whispered in his ear.

"Potter! What do you think you are doing?"

Not feeling the need to hide their conversation, Harry didn't bother whispering his return answer. It was heard by all.

"What do I think I'm doing, Minister? Why, I'm telling the public my side of the story, so they know what really happened. You didn't really think I would want to accept any type of award from you of all people, now did you? Anything coming from you would be worthless in my opinion. As if I care about some stupid medal anyway. I've got more important things on my mind presently."

"You can't do this Potter!" Fudge yelled. It seemed like he forgot over a thousand of his voting constituents were listening, not to mention the countless reporters. "This press conference is over. You're clearly under some spell, or still crazy like that old bat you call a professor! You're to return to Hogwarts at once, and await my arrival while I try to clean up this mess."

"Sorry Minister, but I plan to finish my story. I think the public would like to hear it after all. And as how just a moment ago you were bending over backwards to accommodate me, I think it only fair that I be allowed to say what I want."

"Absolutely not! I'm the Minister of Magic, and you'll do as I say! I will not be ignored by a mere child!" Fudge was coming apart at the seams, and the fact wasn't lost on the crowd. Some of them were eagerly looking forward to whatever Harry had to say, none more than Rita Skeeter.

Harry replied. "I say let the public decide. If they want to hear what I have to say; hear how you've been lying to them for as long as I've known you, and how you're still underemphasizing the public threat from Voldemort; than I'll stay and speak. If however they believe you; and think I'm just some raving teenager who's let his fame get to his head, and doesn't know the real threat even when you admitted yourself I was present at the Ministry battle last June; than I'll leave. How about that?"

"Let him stay!" A call came out from the crowd.

"I want to hear the truth!" Another followed.

All throughout the assembly, the public voiced their decision in Harry's favor. Some were even calling shouts and insults to the Minister, as long as they were far enough back and couldn't be identified. "It's really quite humorous!" Harry thought as he watched Fudge try uselessly to regain control of the crowd. "If we were in the muggle world, they'd be throwing rotten cabbage right about now."

After a minute of uneventful pleading, it was clear to Fudge that he wasn't going to regain the favor of the public, and that things could only get worse. That's when he turned his tail and marched over to the side of the platform.

"Where's this boy's chaperon?" He yelled. "I want Potter escorted back to school immediately! And detained until I figure out what to do with him! Potter! Who'd you come here with?"

Harry would have answered, but didn't need to. The huge figure of Hagrid was hard to miss, as was his booming voice.

"I'm Harry's escort! You remember me, don't you Minister Fudge? I'm the fellow you had thrown in Azkaban a few years back. Without a shred of proof, either!"

The crowd of course heard what Hagrid had to say, and quieted to hear what other delightful details they might learn about their elected leader. Hagrid's temporary imprisonment had been kept under wraps, and it wasn't common knowledge he had ever been accused of opening the Chamber of Secrets. Being jailed without a proper trial was a serious offence, and not many of the people present thought it fair of Hagrid. He had been the Hogwart's groundskeeper for almost fifty years after all, and none present except Harry had experienced his odd teaching methods in CoMC. To most who knew him, Hagrid was just a pleasant, if slightly large, failed wizard who wouldn't hurt a fly.

"That's not the issue!" Fudge screamed. He had lost complete control by now, and physically grabbed Harry around the arm and dragged him to the side near Hagrid. "I won't have this boy telling lies! You're his escort, and I demand that you remove him at once!"

Hagrid just smiled as he rested his considerable weight on an extra sturdy chair. Even seated, his head was still far enough above the ground, enabling all others to see. “I was told to escort Harry to a press conference, to accept his award and give a speech. Until his speech is over, I ain’t going nowhere!”

Hagrid gave a huge grin to Harry as he said that, and Harry gave a thanks nod back. This was going better than he planned. Fudge had lost all interest in Harry now, and let go of his arm as he continued his argument with Hagrid. He had to, because no other Hogwarts staff was present. The few Ministry personal he could have asked for support were few, and had wisely moved as far away from the soon to be ex-Minister as possible. With Fudge down off the platform, Harry made his way back over to the podium to continue his speech.

“So, do you all want to hear what I have to say?” He asked the crowd. A large cheer was his answer. One single “Nooooooooo!” was the only opposition.

“Ok then. As I was saying, Fudge and others in the Ministry have been lying to the public for many years now. The reports made by the Daily Prophet last summer weren’t even the worst of them. Even now the Ministry controls and censors what the major news sources report, which is why I chose The Quibbler for my interview last year. They may have some interesting conspiracy theories printed in their pages, but at least I can trust them to print the truth of what I say.”

Harry joke about the Quibbler elicited a few chuckles in the crowd. The paper had long been discounted by respectable readers until Harry’s article last year, which had tripled its subscription. Since then, he’d been informed by Luna, the paper had turned more serious, and the factual and more absurd news stories were divided into separate sections of the paper.

“Fudge had those articles about Dumbledore and me printed up because we both admitted to Voldemort being returning to the wizarding world. Fudge didn’t want to deal with the fact that his happy little society was about to encounter some dark times, so he ignored the problem, and tried to discredit those who opposed him. That’s no

way to run a government. Earlier today Fudge mentioned previous Headmistress Delores Umbridge, still under review for alleged abuse of power. Do you know how she abused her power? She was part of the plot to cover up what really happened last June. First as defense teacher and High Inquisitor, and then as Headmistress in Dumbledore's place, she used her contact with the students to spread Ministry propaganda. She even had my own dormmates thinking I was bonkers. And what happened to me and anyone else who would get in her way, or answered questions that contradicted her story? I'll tell you want she did. She physically abused the students during detention to condition them into silence!"

The crowd was shocked faced with the truth, and Fudge to the side was trying to hide from the angry outbursts. He had already given up trying to control either the crowd or Harry, and could now only stay and watch the damage inflicted, and try to counter it once Harry left.

"See this?" Harry asked, raising his hand. "I had to spend two weeks detention carving lines on the back of my hand at Umbrige's direction, simply because I wouldn't agree to spread her lies. You know what else she did? She was the one who sent Dementors after me and my muggle cousin last summer, hoping to get me expelled for using underage magic. She admitted it herself! She never said Fudge had anything to do with it, but I wouldn't put it past him. I was dragged in front of a full Wizengamont court simply for defending myself against a pair of Dementors, and I almost got expelled for it thanks to Fudge. If it wasn't for a squib eye witness, he would have done it too!"

Harry couldn't even see Fudge in the angry crowd anymore. He must have either left completely, or hidden himself behind Hagrid. The Dementors' defection from Azkaban and Ministry control was only a few months old, and more people were frightened of them now than ever before. Harry's tale of facing two with no Ministry support was a frightening possibility for them all.

"Fudge's whole speech today was a lie. We haven't been working together to fight against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. If anything, Fudge had been making the work more difficult. Just a few weeks ago he let some walk free, proclaimed 'innocent of all charges' without even a trial. I've seen Lucius Malfoy and the others in Death

Eater masks and robes. Hell, they were arrested wearing them! How could they simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time, as Fudge claims. He just let them off because they make substantial campaign contributions, and help keep him in power.

“And that whole thing about Voldemort being weak and not as powerful as before is complete rubbish! From the second he was reborn he was as strong as he’s ever been. I should know, seeing as how I had to duel him at the time! He might even be stronger now, seeing as how the Ministry has completely ignored him for over a year, giving him time to do god knows what. I have no idea what that stupid prophecy said. It was destroyed in the fight before anyone heard it. I don’t know what Fudge’s “crack team of investigators” could have possibly found out, seeing as how me and the others present during the fight were never even questioned. It’s obvious, to me at least, that they just made up their whole findings report. Fudge told them what to say, and they wrote a report accommodating his wishes.

“And someone did die that night, no matter what Fudge says! Only me and about a dozen other people saw it happen! My godfather died that night, fighting for a cause that he believed in, even when he had every right not too. He was a good man, who was wrongly accused of a crime he didn’t commit, and paid nearly 15 years of his life for it. Again, jailed without a trial. He never deserved what happened to him, and Fudge shouldn’t dare try to omit his death or show the lack of respect Sirius deserves!”

Harry was getting a little emotional by now, and had to slow down from the fast paced accusations he was making. A reporter from the crowd took advantage of Harry’s slight pause.

“Sirius who? Harry, who was your godfather?” Rita Skeeter asked. She knew damn well who Harry’s godfather was, but couldn’t turn down the public opportunity to get face recognition.

Although loud before during Fudge’s public humiliation, the crowd had been calm all during Harry’s truth telling tirade. The noise level dropped almost to nothing as they eagerly awaited Harry’s answer.

Hedwig nipped his earlobe in comfort, pushing him forward to answer the question.

"He is Sirui....was, Sirius Black." He expected screams and more questions, but got none at all. The silence was deafening. Obviously, the crowd believed him enough to hear the rest of his story, and for that Harry was encouraged to continue.

"Sirius Black never was the secret keeper for my parents, and he never killed a street full of muggles either. He was sent to Azkaban where he spent 12 years of his life, and another three years on the run from the Ministry. I found all this out over two years ago, when I met him face to face along with the real criminal responsible. The criminal eventually escaped, but I still told Minister Fudge all this, and even had eye witnesses besides myself to testify. But Fudge once again claimed I was making up a story to gain attention, and didn't spend more than a few moments listening to what I had to say before dismissing me completely.

"Many of you think Sirius Black is the worst criminal this country has seen in years. You all think he's the right hand man of the enemy. You think he's the biggest Death Eater of them all. Well I'm here to tell you that's all false! Sirius was killed fighting against Voldemort, and was actually fighting his own cousin Bellatrix Lestrange at the very end. I may not be able to bring him back to life, but at least I can finally prove his innocence and clear his name. I've captured the real criminal this past summer, and I've been keeping him locked up until now. I would have turned him over to the Ministry normally, but I've learned they can't all be trusted. Fudge, or the Voldemort supporters who work there, would have made it all too easy for his escape or death before questioning. While that may still happen, in front of you all I think there will be enough witnesses so that this can't be swept under the carpet again."

While he left the audience to digest what he had just said, Harry reached into his robe pocket and grabbed his evidence. It was a bold move he was about to make, but Harry felt confident he had enough support from the crowd to warrant such a risk.

"Ladies and gentleman, let me introduce you to the real culprit of Sirius Black's crimes. This is the man whose actions led to the death of my parents. This is the man who killed 14 muggles and framed Sirius Black just to protect himself. This is the man who cut off his own hand to bring back Voldemort over a year ago, and who'd been his most faithful servant ever since. You all thought he was dead, but he's not. He's just been in hiding. Here he is, Peter Pettigrew!"

Harry thrust the petrified rat form of the former Marauder up in the air, for all the world to see. Harry didn't know exactly what to expect, but hardly anyone in the crowd made a move or said a word. What were they to think, faced with a rodent who was supposedly responsible for some of the worst crimes in wizarding history? Harry could see the doubt in their eyes, but wasn't concerned. He knew what the truth was, and he could prove it.

"See!" Came a mad yell from the crowd. "He's nothing but an attention seeking crackpot! A rat, honestly! We're to believe a frozen rat is an evil wizard responsible for killing so many people? Everyone knows Sirius Black is a murderer, and nothing you can say will prove that he's not!" Apparently Fudge hadn't left, and he made his appearance at the time he thought he might have a chance to turn the tides back against Harry.

"This isn't just any rat Minister Fudge, this is a animagus in the form of a rat." With that, Harry threw the rat down to the floor of the erected stage and used the same spell Remus had used years ago in the Shrieking Shack. The spell caused Wormtail to turn back to his human form, and the crowd went wild in response. Woman and children in the front rows screamed, while men and others voiced their disbelief. While he had never been the most popular of people, Peter Pettigrew was still a very familiar face from the countless articles written about him and Sirius. Three years ago during Sirius's escape, the many photos had been published again. While the still petrified form of Wormtail looked much more haggard and worn than the photos of himself 15 years earlier, he was still very recognizable.

"Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail, has been an illegal animagus since his own Hogwarts days. He was my parents' secret keeper, and it was him who turned the information over to Voldemort,

and has served him ever since. You all thought him dead, but he's really been living in disguise all this time, only appearing human to his fellow Death Eaters. Fudge, if you still think I'm lying, I'm sure the Dark Mark on what's left of his arm will prove me right."

"It's an imposter I tell you! It must be an imposter! Peter Pettigrew is dead. The man's a hero, and I won't have you tarnish a good man's name!" Fudge just wouldn't give up.

Harry didn't care though. If anything, Fudge's arguments just made his job easier.

"If the man's an imposter, than how'd I do it? I'm just a sixth year student, after all? And if the man's been dead for fifteen years, than how'd I do all this? I know, let's ask him. Finite Incantatum!"

The strong body bind Harry had placed on Pettigrew before transforming him into a rat was broken with Harry's spell, and Peter began to move in a very different environment from before he'd been cursed. Instead of a dark stone cell, he now found himself on a stage in front of hundreds of people, all focused on him. Before he could even think of a way to escape, Harry cast another spell. This one conjured a pair of restraints, which prevented any type of transformation, and tethered the man to the ground. He wouldn't be escaping this time.

"Before coming here today, I administered a mild truth serum to Pettigrew, which is still in his system." Harry explained. "It's nowhere near as strong as Veritaserum, but it should allow a few simple questions. Peter, what's your full name?"

The look on his face showed he didn't want to answer, but Wormtail didn't have the magical strength to fight even such a mild truth serum. A stronger wizard might be able to, but without his silver hand, Peter was once again reduced to a sniveling weakling.

"Peter Pontificus Pettigrew." The answer wasn't loud, but Harry had steered him in front of the magical amplifier.

"Did you betray your parents to Voldemort? Do you still serve him?"

“Yes.”

The crowd was shocked, and rightly so. They had long ago believed the man a hero, and Harry was very neatly ending that belief. The questions could have gone on forever, but Harry had made his point. He only had one last thing to ask.

“Peter, to the best of your knowledge, has Sirius Black ever been in league with Voldemort or any of his supporters, or committed any of the crimes he’s been accused of?”

Again you could see Wormtail fight the potion within him, and lose once more. His answer came in another weak reply.

“No. My master once sought out the services of Sirius, but was refused. Sirius has never done any of the things he’s been accused of, especially not side with the Dark Lord. He’s innocent of his crimes.”

Harry was happy with the answers, and now went to end his speech. He had said more than enough that day already, and it was time to wrap things up before he gave away anymore of his secrets.

“A few days ago I gave another interview to Rita Skeeter, which will appear tomorrow morning exclusively in a special Sunday edition of The Quibbler. In it I describe in detail the facts surrounding Pettigrew’s crimes, and Sirius Black’s innocence. I know how Sirius escaped Azkaban, and I know why. I know where Pettigrew’s been hiding for 15 years, and I know how he was discovered. All this, and more about Fudge’s policy of lying to the public, will be addressed in the article, and I encourage everyone to read it. Is there an auror in the crowd anywhere?”

Three men and two woman stepped forward, one of which Harry recognized. Kingsley Shackelbolt was an Order member, and was probably present on their behalf. Probably to guard Harry, no less. And while Harry certainly had his issues with the Order, he knew at least that the man could be trusted with this task.

"Auror Shacklebolt, isn't it?" Harry couldn't give away the fact that he knew the man personally. "Weren't you the auror in charge of recapturing Sirius Black?"

"Yes, I was. If what you say is true, then I guess I can stop putting in those extra hours now."

His response broke up the seriousness of the crowd, and even caused a slight smile on Harry's face. He'd never known the large black auror to have a sense of humor before.

"I'll leave Pettigrew in custody with you then. Please remember that he's an animagus, and can easily escape normal cells and restraints. I trust it you'll make sure he faces proper interrogation, and is charged for his crimes, as well as clears Sirius Black of those falsely charged against him."

Shacklebolt nodded and took the reigns attached to Wormtail's restraints. On stage surrounded by able bodied wizards, he never had the opportunity to even move, much less attempt to escape. Now he was Ministry property, and there had been hundreds of witnesses.

Once Wormtail was off the stage, the rat was assaulted by reporters, and questions from the crowd in general. Much to Harry's amusement, and totally not part of his plan, the truth serum still wearing off caused him to give more complete answers than he would have liked. As the attention was momentarily diverted from him, Harry took the opportunity to jump into the small tent erected behind the stage to get out from the public eye. Hagrid and the Weasleys saw where he went, and they were the only ones who followed.

"Blimey Harry," Hagrid congratulated him, "good show! Nice to see Fudge get what he finally deserves. This all came as a shock though. Didn't think Dumbledore would go for something like this."

Harry didn't have a chance to correct the half giant before he was assaulted by his super human strength. Hedwig flew up to the tent rafters for a more stable perch as Hagrid continued to pound Harry's back in admiration. Hagrid was still hammering him into the ground when the Weasley's peaked into the tent, not a moment too soon.

"Hagrid mate, let on up Harry." Charlie was the first face through the tent opening, and thankfully stopped the semi-beating Harry was taking. "You're gonna pummel him to death! Let my mum have a turn before you do, would you?"

Harry couldn't help but think he'd rather contend with Hagrid's garbage pail lid sized hands than suffer a stern verbal thrashing from Mrs. Wesaley. However, he had avoided her for far too long, and had already decided to confront her today. Hopefully, she wouldn't be too bad, and time had softened her up a bit.

Bill was next through the tent, followed by his parents. Bill gave a thumbs up signal to Harry as well as a smile, but didn't have time for anything else before his mother shoved him aside, on her way to ambush Harry. Before he knew it, he was enveloped by a trademark Molly Weasley hug.

"Harry dear! Oh, you're all right! You had us so worried this summer. Where have you been?"

Harry wouldn't answer her question. But even if he wanted to, he couldn't. Although now taller than the matronly woman, she had pulled him down into one of the strongest grips he knew of, and his face was pushed quite embarrassingly between two ample breasts. His muffled voice was the only response heard.

"Molly dear, you're suffocating the poor boy. Let him breathe a little, would you?" Thank god for Mr. Weasley's sensible head. Unless there were muggles around, Harry could always count on him to help control his overbearing wife. After another few pats on the back, Harry was finally released.

"Harry, where'd this phoenix come from? Me and Bill have been wondering during the whole speech." Charlie was off in the corner talking to his brother and Hagrid, while admiring the feathered bird cautiously. He and Bill already knew of the money, and wanted to give his parents some privacy to discuss the matter. Hagrid had wanted to talk more about Fudge's embarrassment, but at the chance

to see such a magnificent creature up close, he joined the Weasley brothers. He was the Care of Magical Creatures professor after all.

"The phoenix can wait Charlie. We have some more important things to discuss." This came from Mrs. Weasley. "You can surely entertain yourselves for a few moments, can't you?"

Her sons nodded, and turned back to admire the bird. With a questioning look to her master, Hedwig hopped down out of the rafters to Charlie's outstretched arm. Harry had given her permission, seeing as how the conversation with the Weasley parents was going to take more than a brief minute.

"I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to see you this summer; Mrs. Weasley, Mr. Weasley. But I've been real busy, and I'm sure you've heard by now I've been making my own decisions lately. I was thinking of visiting the Burrow, but didn't believe it safe. How have you been? Ron and Ginny said not much happened this summer."

"Not much except you running away from home, you mean! Honestly Harry, what were you thinking? Until Remus came back from his first visit, I don't think I slept more than a few hours at a time the week you were missing! And Dumbledore not knowing where you were! I don't think I've been so scared in years! Why didn't you come to live with us at headquarters if you wanted to leave the Dursleys?"

She wasn't the first one to ask the question, and Harry had to remember that she was only worried about him to prevent answering the same way he had Hermione's question. Harry didn't want to blow up at the Weasley's for just being concerned.

"Mrs. Weasley, I left the Dursleys not just because I wanted to leave them, but because I also wanted to get out on my own. I know Remus has told you this already, so please just try to accept it. If I was at headquarters with the Order all summer long, I never would have had the chance to do the things I wanted. Dumbledore would never have allowed it. Do you think he would have let me go capture Wormtail if he had control of me? Never. Sorry if you worried, but it's just something everyone's going to have to accept."

"But Harry, there must have been some other way. Dumbledore only has your best...."

"Now Molly," Arthur interrupted, "I don't think we're going to convince Harry otherwise. From what we've heard from Remus and his letters, it's obvious Harry has some pretty strong feelings about all this. We may not agree, but Harry's old enough to start making some of his own decisions. Besides, we've got some other business to discuss. Like the sudden appearance of 300,000 galleons in our family vault. Harry?"

This was the part Harry was dreading, but at least the admonishing was over with. Harry expected to be scolded at for avoiding them on the train platform as well, but so far that hadn't been brought up.

As expected, the Weasleys wanted to return the money, with no exceptions. Harry resisted though, and reintroduced the reasoning he discussed in his letter to them. Now more than ever, Harry was comfortable with the material wealth his family had left him, but a whole summer with only two house-elves left him hungry for more human contact. The Weasleys had always taken him in, he explained, and gave him what he had sorely lacked the first decade of his life. And it wasn't just the food, or the lodgings, or the attention he got. It was the little things too, like the hand made jumpers every Christmas, and the chores he had to do like clearing the yard of garden gnomes. Harry didn't feel like a charity case with the group of red heads, he felt like part of the family.

Arthur wasn't as hard to convince as Molly was, but she finally gave in to keeping the money with one final promise from Harry. He had to promise that he'd never go missing again like he had last summer, and cause her to worry. With a final last hug Harry agreed, and even invited the whole family over for the holidays.

"Nonsense Harry." Mrs. Weasley said as she wiped her wet eyes. "We always spend Christmas at the Burrow if we're able. Why don't you come home with us this year?"

Harry didn't think it was safe, and besides wanted to spend some time in his new home. He already planned on getting a huge tree for

the living room area. The Weasleys understood his caution, and spending the break at Grimmauld place was out of the question as far as Harry was concerned, so the Weasleys finally gave in. They did agree to spend Boxing Day with Harry though, even if Molly was concerned with where they would all be staying. None of them had any idea about where Harry was living, and Harry wasn't about to tell them. It would be a great surprise!

"Done over here yet?" Bill asked, walking over to the others with Charlie and Hagrid in tow. Hedwig flew the short distance over to Harry, and perched on his head. The others laughed at the sight, because Hedwig had caused Harry's long hair to flop down over his eyes, and he couldn't see a thing.

"Oh Harry, you really do need a haircut! You want me to give you a quick trim while you're here? I do all the boys' hair."

"Not all of them." Replied Bill. "Don't let her Harry; I like the long look. I've been trying to convince Ron to grow his hair out for ages now. At least someone is carrying on in the tradition, even if the owner doesn't have red hair. Maybe we can give you an earring as well?"

Mrs. Weasley would have no more teasing, and ordered Bill to go fetch Percy for the return trip home. While still at odds with his family, Ginny let Harry know that her parents were trying to patch up their relationship. Percy now spent weekends back at the Burrow, but otherwise had no contact with his family. He wasn't privy to any Order of the Phoenix knowledge, nor could he stay at Grimmauld Place when the Weasleys were spending their time there.

Once the good news about the Weasleys keeping the money spread around, and Bill left to find his ostentatious brother, Charlie brought the conversation back to Hedwig.

"So Harry, where'd you get the phoenix from? I've never seen a white one before."

"No one has, Charles. To the best of my knowledge, there hasn't been a white phoenix in over 900 years." No one had seen him enter, but the jovial voice of the Headmaster couldn't be mistaken. He must

have slipped into the tent when no one noticed, and now stood behind Harry and the others in bright green robes with purple sunbursts.

“Professor.” Harry greeted him with a slight nod to the head. The two had both been on their best behavior in each other’s presence since their last meeting, even if they were cautiously wary. The meeting with Snape after his Friday class had been one for the history books, but at least Harry was able to show he was a responsible person, and hadn’t taken his safety this summer lightly. Dumbledore hadn’t approved of Harry’s methods, but the two were no longer arguing about the summer. They had simply agreed to disagree.

“You remember Hedwig, don’t you Charlie? I know she was an owl when you last saw her, but it’s still the same old girl. She had an accident this summer, and got hurt pretty bad. It looked like she died even, but then a few moments later, she and almost the whole room went up in flames, and I started to hear phoenix song. I don’t know how long it lasted, but when it was all over, Hedwig was as you see her now. She had a burning day right before I left for school, so that’s why she hasn’t been around till now. It was just good timing that she showed up when she did. Hedwig never could stand to ignore any attention she could get.”

Hedwig chipped in agreement, which made everybody laugh. No one understood how such a transformation had happened, but they didn’t get a chance to ask any questions. Harry had one first.

“Actually Professor,” he asked, “I’ve been meaning to ask you about what happened. I still don’t know how this is possible, and no one seems to believe me unless they see Hedwig for herself. Remus tried looking in a few books, but couldn’t find anything outside of fairy tales. And people seem to make a big deal out of her being a white phoenix as well. Do you know what that’s about?”

“Indeed Harry.” Dumbledore answered. “Just as Fawkes is decorated, mostly all phoenixes are colored red and gold. The only exceptions are those who are white, like Hedwig here. White phoenixes are believed to be something of a myth, but as you now know, one that is very much true. There are tons of stories describing them, mostly

bedtime tales for young children. Some talk about a white phoenix familiar of the great wizard Merlin, others talk about them belonging to the forest elves, who have long since passed from our world. The true story, as much as I know, isn't as glamorous as these, but is equally interesting."

"Do you mind telling it?" Harry asked. If he finally understood what happened to Hedwig, that would be one less thing Harry had to research. He still had to find out about the golden patronus he had cast.

"Not at all Harry. I even suspect Hagrid and the others would care to listen in as well, as it truly is an interesting tale." Dumbledore explained. "But it will take some time. Why don't we continue this back up at the castle?"

Harry didn't have a problem with that, but a quick peek outside the tent caused him to reconsider. There were still people everywhere, and it looked like the Minister and his team were trying to work some damage control. The crowd would still be around for awhile, and Harry didn't want to show himself if he could help it.

"How about we stay here instead? It's looking busy out there, and I'd rather stay out of the way. I think I've given the press more than enough to write about for one day." With a wave of his wand, Harry conjured up cozy armchairs for the group, and a pitcher of lemonade and glasses to drink. Even Hagrid was accommodated, his chair looking more like an oversized love seat. Molly Weasley served the drinks while Dumbledore raided his eyebrow in Harry's direction. Multiple conjuring was extremely difficult work, but Harry was tired of hiding his skills. Besides, he doubted the furniture would last more than an hour. He hadn't been concentrating that much on it.

Once everybody had a cool glass of the citrus drink, and Arthur and Hagrid showed their like of the sweet and sour muggle beverage, Dumbledore continued with his story.

"Well, as you all know phoenixes by nature are very rare. I myself came about Fawkes as a hatchling more than ninety years ago, and he's only been the third phoenix I've ever seen, until now. One of the

others belonged to my dear friend Nicolas Flamel, and it's him I've learned most of my knowledge about phoenixes from. As Hagrid and Harry already know, Nicolas was over 750 years old when he died, and had seen much in his lifetime.

"Anyway, at any one time there are approximately four to six dozen phoenixes alive in the world, maybe about a dozen of them residing in Britain. It's a common misconception that phoenixes live forever, but in fact they don't. They live on average 200 years, perhaps longer if they've led a quiet life. Ashcroft, Nicolas's phoenix, died at the ripe old age of 263 just a few years before Nicolas himself passed on.

"During their lifespan, phoenixes mate for life, and only have one offspring, no matter what the circumstances. Fawkes is actually Ashcroft's son, and one day Fawkes will find a mate and have a son or daughter of his own. As you can see, over a period of years the phoenix population decreases. A pair will only have one offspring, and their offspring will only have a single as well. When you take into consideration the number of phoenixes who die prematurely, before they mate, the population becomes even less."

"But Professor," Harry interrupted, "how can phoenixes die? I saw Fawkes take a killing curse straight to the head, and he turned out fine."

"Well Harry," Dumbledore continued, "normally, they die like everything else. They get old. Certainly you know wizards live to be older than most muggles. Likewise, phoenixes live to be much older than most other birds. Their burning days are part of their life cycle, but not the only part. As a phoenix gets older, their burning days come closer together. Let me ask you this, Harry. How much time passed between when Hedwig first became a phoenix, and when she had her first burning day?"

"About two months."

"Well, that makes sense then, as she's very young. I stopped counting long ago, but it shouldn't surprise you that Fawkes has little more than a month between episodes. As you can see, the older the phoenix, the shorter the time span between burnings. Eventually,

they'll only have a day or two between burnings, and shortly after that only a few hours. Then one day, the phoenix will simply go up in flames, and never be reborn again. And so concludes their life."

"But Professor," Charlie asked, "you haven't said how a phoenix could die prematurely. If a killing curse won't do it, I can't imagine what would."

Dumbledore just smiled. It was conversations like these that reminded him how much he missed teaching. Speaking of teachers....

"Let's ask our resident Care of Magical Creatures professor that question. Hagrid?"

"Well," Hagrid exclaimed, "I don't specialize in phoenixes, as they're too tame for my likes, but I seem to remember something about them being overexposed to death being unhealthy. Like, they could face one killing curse, but not ten. Or something like that."

"Correct Hagrid!" Dumbledore beamed. "Very good! Perhaps you can include all this in a future lesson, if Harry is kind enough to lend Hedwig to the class. Yes, anyways, as Hagrid explained. A single killing curse, or any means of death, can neatly be handled by any phoenix. They can survive a fire, be shot by a muggle gun, or even survive starvation I've heard. But when the phoenix dies, it's reborn right away in its juvenile form. Another death so quickly after the first will shock the phoenix further, until enough deaths in a row can actually cause a permanent death. The younger the phoenix, the more trauma he or she can survive. A phoenix over 200 years of age could probably only survive one or at most two violent deaths. Hedwig, being as young as she is, could probably survive 5 or more killing curses in a row, although I hope she never has to go through that."

Hedwig shrilled a positive concurrence from Harry's lap. He had been gently stroking her chest during Dumbledore's tale.

"So, that's how a phoenix dies prematurely. It doesn't happen often, but occasionally a phoenix will die before it had the chance to sire an offspring. If it weren't for white phoenixes, the number of total

phoenixes in the world would constantly diminish, until none were left. White phoenixes such as Hedwig repopulate the species, to make up for decreased numbers.”

“How so Albus.” Even Mr. Weasley was interested enough to be paying attention. The subject of phoenixes wasn’t as fascinating as rechargeable batteries, but few subjects were.

“Well Arthur, white phoenixes are the only ones capable of birthing multiple children, in multiple litters. While a normal phoenix can only have a single offspring, white phoenixes, which are always female, can have a countless number. Their offspring replenish the low numbers as needed, and bring the population back up to a strong number. No one knows for sure, but I think the most phoenixes ever being recorded alive at one single time is 81. I doubt more than a hundred have ever existed at once.”

“But Professor,” Harry argued, “that still doesn’t explain how Hedwig became a phoenix. I mean, she was an owl for Pete’s sake. She was a great owl and all, but I don’t think there was anything special about her really? So why’d this happen to her?”

“Ah, therein lies one of the largest questions in the magical world, Harry. As they only show up once in a millennium, it’s hard to answer that question. Not even I am that old. There have been many theories of course, and the one I believe is the one speculated by Nicolas himself. In his youth, his mentor told him tales of a pure white phoenix, who was made from a familiar cat. The tale says, the cat was drowned by an enemy of the witch she belonged to, and was found moments after her death. From the story you told, it sounds like much the same thing happened to the cat as did Hedwig. A great fire consumed the body, and phoenix song could be heard, until the familiar was reborn in the form of a phoenix. Be it cat or owl, it looks like white phoenixes are made from recently deceased pets. Unlike normal phoenixes which are hatched from eggs, white ones are born of hardship and death.”

Well, that didn’t answer anything. Harry was getting frustrated now, and didn’t think he’d ever get an answer. Apparently, Charlie was getting just as discouraged.

"But Professor, why does that happen?"

Again, he smiled. "I was getting to that. Forgive my ramblings. I admit, without Minerva to keep me in check, I sometimes wonder off a topic. As I was saying, my suspicion, and that of Nicolas's, is that Hedwig became a phoenix because of you Harry."

"Me?"

"Yes. Let me ask you this. What were you feeling as you watched Hedwig die, and the moments right afterward as well?"

Harry tried to remember the painful memories, but it was hard to do with Hedwig preened on his lap. Her close proximity made him feel better even without her beautiful song.

"I guess I was sad." He admitted. "More sad than I've ever been. Her death reminded me of Sirius's death, and that of my parents too I guess. Hedwig was my first friend ever, and only she ever spent time with the Dursleys. She was the only one I had to keep me company, no matter where I was. More than anything, I wanted her back. I didn't want to believe that she was dying."

"Yes, you see! You were very emotional, and wished for more than anything in the world for Hedwig to come back to you." Dumbledore was almost dancing in his seat with glee. "And Harry, what usually happens to witches and wizards when they become very emotional? Think back to your childhood."

He preferred not to, but saw what Dumbledore was trying to get at.

"You mean accidental magic?" That was the obvious answer, but Harry couldn't believe Hedwig becoming a phoenix was caused by him. "Are you saying that I...I willed Hedwig back to life?"

"Yes!" The old wizard really was bouncing in his seat now. "Of course it's all speculation, but I can't see any other way this could happen. Consider this. Phoenixes by nature are animals of inherent good. They detest anything evil, and their song is even harmful to evil

beings. You Harry, who have suffered numerous times at the hands of one of the world's most evil wizards, are the same. You're inherently good, just like the phoenix. It's my belief that a person with such good intentions and morals is the only one possible to create a white phoenix. It doesn't happen all the time, but in the grand scheme of things, every thousand years or so when the universe is ready for one, I believe white phoenixes are willed into being by light wizards through accidental magic. Only such powerful emotions could bring to life such a creature."

"Errrr....OK." Harry didn't know what to say, but his stammering caused the others to laugh. Dumbledore's belief was a lot to take in, that's for sure. But if it were true, which Harry still wasn't sure of, than at least he knew that he was a good person, and was doing the right things with his life. That was a worthy thought.

The next five minutes were spent passing Hedwig around so everybody could have a pet, and swapping some of the more ridiculous white phoenix tall tales. Mrs. Weasley was just telling her favorite about a magical princess being cursed to spend her nights as one by an evil witch, when Bill finally returned with Percy. Neither was looking too happy. In fact, once he spotted Harry, Percy looked enraged. He didn't even notice the others seated in a circle, sipping the last of their lemonade.

"You!" Percy spat, pointing his finger at Harry. "Do you have any idea what you've done? Minister Fudge was kind enough to nominate you for one of the Ministry's most prestigious awards, and you don't even have the decency to graciously accept it. Instead, you insult not only me and my team of investigators, but Minister Fudge himself! Not to mention all those lies you told. The Ministry is perfectly capable of deciding how to best rule the population, thank you very much. It's obvious you're still in league with Dumbledore to overthrow the Ministry."

Harry wasn't going to have any of this, even if Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were present.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Weatherby!" Harry didn't use the wrong name accidentally. "If you spent one minute actually

investigating like you were supposed to, instead of just blindly following what Fudge said, you might have learned the truth of what happened that night. I haven't told a single lie, which is more than I can say about some. Fudge has been wanting to discredit me for years, and now I got the chance to defend myself. It's you who should be ashamed, not me! You've been ignoring your own family for choosing to side with Dumbledore, correctly I might add, and now you're not even man enough to admit when you're wrong. Tell me Percy, have you even apologized yet for being such a prat last year? Ginny told me what your idea of an apology was. I heard you got a good talking to from Bill at work because of it too."

Hedwig had flown back into the rafters the moment the loud shouting began, and the others made their presence known before the situation could escalate further. Dumbledore was quietly sucking on a lemon wedge, and seemed to want to stay out of the conversation. It was family business, after all.

Percy had more to say in his defense, but with so many others pitted against him, he turned his back and left the tent in a huff just as quickly as he had entered.

"Oh my!" Dumbledore finally spoke up. "I'm afraid Percy seems rather upset at all this. Perhaps you should go after him Molly. Never leave a conversation in anger, I always say. That doesn't always happen of course, but I do try."

Mrs. Weasley couldn't have agreed more, and exited after her son with one last hug from Harry. He promised to write them soon, and the rest of the Weasley clan followed in her wake grudgingly.

With Dumbledore's permission Hagrid excused himself, as he had lesson plans to attend to. He wanted to squeeze in a lesson about phoenixes while it was all fresh in his mind, and that meant he had to do something with the adolescent chimeras he had grazing in a locked pen. They would have to wait for another week.

"Why don't we walk back together Harry? I have a few things yet to discuss."

Harry agreed to Dumbledore's proposition, and both found that the center of town had cleared out much since the end of his speech. There were still a few people milling around, but they were only the normal townsfolk going about their business. The reporters and photographers seemed to be gone.

"A most enlightening day for the wizarding world, I must say. I had a feeling it would be in my best interest to attend today's festivities, and I was indeed proven right." Harry and his headmaster made their way slowly to the train station. Hagrid had taken the carriage, and that left only the well worn trail for the two to travel by. From the train station, it was maybe a twenty minute walk to the castle gates, and Harry hoped he could spend the time without arguing.

"You were there? Funny I didn't see you?" It was hard to imagine he could have missed Dumbledore in his bright green and purple robes, but if anyone could have done it, it was most certainly him. There are ways to make oneself invisible after all, other than using an invisibility cloak.

"I didn't wish to be seen, as I'm sure you can appreciate. In my position I would have drawn unwanted attention, and I can't appear to choose sides between my students and the Minister. While Cornelius and myself may not agree on many issues, at least in public we must appear civil and cooperative, to maintain the public image. It would not do well to have the public panic, after all."

Harry didn't wholeheartedly agree, but kept his opinion to himself. It wasn't really needed after all, what with the speech he had just made. His opinion of the Minister was now very much a matter of public record.

The two continued in comfortable silence for a bit longer, until they reached the train station which lay dormant most of the year. It appeared the mass number of reporters and photographers hadn't left after all. They had simply moved to a new location, one which was sure to be visited by the Hogwarts student.

"Oh brother! They must have noticed me gone missing, and have been waiting here since!" Harry didn't like the prospect of wading

through so many reporters, only to be followed on the long hike back to the school. Dumbledore could certainly provide him some protection, but there was only so much the old wizard could do. If it were an army of Death Eaters on the other hand, then they'd have no problems.

"We could go around them if you like?" Dumbledore suggested. "As you are aware of the passage already, I don't see the harm in returned back to school via the Shrieking Shack. I myself have not used the tunnel in many years, but I'm sure I would enjoy the experience."

Harry would have taken him up on the offer in an instant, if it weren't for the fact that the shack was already occupied. The moment the words came out of Dumbledore's mouth, Harry remembered that he still had close to fifty wondering souls waiting for a visit, and he was already overdue in his promise. He wasn't yet ready to share that bit of information with the Headmaster.

"Um, I'd prefer not if you don't mind. Too many bad memories." The lie didn't sound convincing, but it must have been, because Dumbledore didn't object. It was the first place he had met Sirius after all, so Harry supposed it could be a realistic excuse.

"Very well then. I guess we'll just have to manage."

"How about something else?" Harry had an idea. Dumbledore so far had been treating him very well that day, as he had the day before. Harry felt like he could share a few things with the old man, as an act of good faith. "Do you trust me?"

Dumbledore looked perplexed, but nodded with a smile. In return, Harry led the two back into town, and headed for Honeydukes. So close after the end of the press conference, the shop was almost empty, and that was just the way Harry liked it.

"Ah! Any alternative that involves a trip to the sweet shop is an excellent plan in my opinion. I could do with researching a new password anyways. I'm ashamed to admit I've started to reuse some old favorites, even to the point that Minerva has noticed. I do

desperately hope some new candies come out soon, or I may have to resort to muggle sweets. Not that I have anything against them, but I prefer to keep muggle sweets as password to my personal quarters, as opposed to my office. In my old age, I have to keep these things straight in my head, you know." Dumbledore rambled on about some of his favorite treats until they reached the shop doors.

Once inside, Professor Dumbledore headed straight for the front counter, but Harry grabbed his arm and directed him towards the back. There were only two customers inside with them, and both were in discussion with the shop owner about the advantages of sugar quills over sweet sticks. Dumbledore almost spoke aloud and broke their cover, but Harry managed to push him into the back room before he could.

"Harry, what are we doing here? I hardly think hiding out in the sweet shop storeroom will make the reporters go away, although I daresay we won't go hungry."

"Just follow me Professor." Harry instructed. "And stay quite. We don't want to be disturbed. Besides, I think you'll enjoy what I have to show you, if you don't already know about it." After that, it didn't take a lot to convince Dumbledore to be led down the stairs to the basement.

The cellar hadn't changed much since Harry's last visit, his third year at Hogwarts when he had snuck in during the first Hogsmeade weekend. There were a few new candies that were stocked in abundance, and the room looked tidier than last time, but there were no other visible changes. Dumbledore kept near the staircase as Harry crossed the room, but came to investigate when Harry pushed back a rug to display the hidden trap door.

"What's this now?" He asked. "And how do you know about it?"

Harry only smiled. "Surely you don't expect me to give away all my secrets, do you Professor? This is another passageway into school. It comes out behind the statue of the hump backed witch, on the fourth floor. There are more passage ways to the school than just the one under the Shrieking Shack."

"Indeed there appear to be Harry, but I was not aware that you knew about them. I myself discovered one as a student many years ago, but it has since caved in. I was unaware of any others "

"You mean the one behind the mirror?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore couldn't hide his surprised face at hearing this, and nodded. "It seems you know more about the subject than you let on. I still have been unable to deduce how you managed to identify Minister Fudge last weekend when he showed up outside my office door. I wonder what else you know about the castle and its surroundings that you shouldn't. I can only imagine how much this particular passage must be used. If I had access to such a supply of sweets in my youth, I shutter to think of the false teeth I might now be wearing."

"Don't worry." Harry reassured him. "I haven't used this passage in years, and I never took any candy. I know some other students have, the ones who told me how to get here, but they always left money behind for their purchases."

While not mentioning the Weasley twins by name, as Harry and Dumbledore climbed down into the trap door, Harry recounted some of the more spectacular Gryffindor parties they had supplied food and beverages for. Both wizards lit their wand with a Lumos spell, and headed in the opposite direction of town as they continued their conversation.

As he knew would happen, Dumbledore only talked about candies and parties for a little while longer, before he switched to a more serious subject. The speech Harry had made, and the possible ramifications it could have, was a great concern for him. Dumbledore did admit that he thought Harry might be up to something when he so eagerly agreed to accept the award, but had no idea Harry was going to share so much.

Just the subject of Peter Pettigrew and his unmasking alone took nearly half the trip. Harry let the other know that he had captured the sniveling wizard the night of his floo message with the help of Remus,

but would say no more. He told Dumbledore Remus would fill him in of the details later. He just had to make sure he warned Remus not to say anything about the Dementors.

One thing that Dumbledore did mention, which Harry hadn't considered, was the possibility that Fudge would be voted out of office. That was Harry's intention of course, but what Dumbledore brought up was the fact that someone even more useless and ignorant could be the person to take his place in office. Maybe even someone with solid ties to Death Easters, or Voldemort himself. Electing a proper Minister after all wasn't guaranteed.

Harry's reply? He wasn't too concerned, although he was grateful for having the possibility pointed out to him. He just told Dumbledore, "Well, that's the kind of thing the Order of the Phoenix should be looking into. It doesn't make sense to just go along with a mediocre Minister, and not risk the chance of finding a better one. Instead, you should be looking into possible candidates, and try to find the best person for the job. With all the connections you and the others have, not to mention the respect, I'm sure you could help nearly anyone get into office. Concentrate on electing a better Minister of Magic, rather than worrying about a worse one."

The trip in the underground tunnel didn't last much longer, and Harry took a quick peak with his x-ray lens to make sure the hallway was deserted before whispering the password to the entrance. It wouldn't do any good to be seen coming out of a secret passage with the Headmaster as him accomplice. The student population still didn't know about the press conference just held, only Harry's close friends did. But even they didn't know what he had planned. Tomorrow when the papers were delivered, it would come as a huge shock to everyone.

"Well Harry," Dumbledore said as he brushed off his robes, "here is where I must be leaving you. My last minute decision to attend the ceremony today caused me to miss lunch, and I'm afraid visiting Honeydukes has done nothing but further my appetite. Would you care to join me for a small meal in the kitchens? Perhaps I can show you a secret or two about the castle in return for sharing your knowledge of this most useful tunnel."

"No thank you sir." Harry politely declined. "I ate an early lunch before the ceremony, and I'm due to meet my prefect patrol partner in the library soon. We don't know each other well, and we're going to spend some time getting to know one another.

"A very good idea. I wish more of the students would break house boundaries to develop friendships. Who is your partner, may I ask?"

"Cami Mitchell, from Hufflepuff. That's about all I know about her though." Harry admitted. "I guess that's why we're meeting."

"I'll leave you to your plans then. Enjoy the rest of your weekend, and I'll see you tomorrow morning for brunch. I don't know about you, but I can't wait to see the school's reaction to what I have no doubt will be a very exciting issue of The Quibbler. Until then."

"Goodbye Professor." Harry waved as the elderly man passed around a corner. "Give the pear an extra tickle for me!" From around the corner, Harry heard the distinct sounds of the Headmaster laughing.

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#### AUTHOR NOTES:

Before I really begin, I just want to say that I know I promised you'd get a chance to see Harry in action back in time, but the chapter ended up being longer than I wanted, so I decided to split it in two. This is the first half of what I had planned. Next chapter will be the second half, and will deliver all that I previously promised. Now that that's over with, I can continue. Well, I hope everyone liked the Fudge bashing scene. I didn't like it as much as the ones about Snape (the second scene, next chapter, will be even better than the first), but it was still fun to write. The long awaited explanation of Hedwig's condition has finally been revealed, and I hope everyone was pleased with what I came up with. It's not exactly what I had originally planned, but it's damned close. I put a lot of thought into creating a unique idea to explain the transformation, and I hope I didn't let my fans down. I also hope I've laid the fears to rest that Harry will forever hate Dumbledore. As you can see, the two can get along admirably, as

long as Harry feels Dumble isn't trying to control his life. A lot more time will pass before Harry will take Dumble's council like he once did. For those of you who haven't joined my Yahoo! group (link on my bio page), I'll be hosting a live chat soon to discuss this latest chapter, and future others. If interested in joining the chat, please join the Yahoo! group (which is free and easy) to find the correct day and time. If it's not already posted, it will be soon. While I'm talking about it, thanks to everyone who's joined already. In less than 24 hours, I already had 100 members. Now I have over 250, and I still can't believe how popular it is. Thanks again.

Whizzy – Thanks for pointing out my “Legilimens” mistake. I corrected it, and a few others that other readers pointed out. As for your second point about Luna being in the Arithmancy class, I don't agree. It never says in Book 5 that she takes the class, and because of her reading the Quibbler constantly, I imagine her taking Ancient Runes over Arithmancy. They're both electives (along with Divination and Muggle Studies), so I think she'd take that class instead. Remember how she reads the runes in the Quibbler upside down?

Frog1 – No, Tonks isn't the DADA in disguise. Rofordit is just a really old witch. Tonks will be around a little though, as one of the roaming aurors. Secondly, I have to keep the sorting hat's plans to myself for now. What will happen doesn't come to be until my sequel, which is a long ways way. Best to put it out of your mind for now.

Holly – Although Harry has far surpassed his peers in Arithmancy and Potions (those are the two he studied this summer), in the other subjects he hasn't done as much work. During the summer, when he did study Charms and Transfiguration (etc.) he never did school work. He went beyond the 7th year curriculum, and looked at advanced magics like the Fidelius and Animagus transformations. So while his theory knowledge is well past that of other students, he still has to learn the spells like everyone else. So he isn't holding back in class, he's just doing a much better job than previous years. You know how he almost managed to beat Hermione in class? He'll stay at about that level for awhile, and then slowly move past her. What Harry's really going to concentrate on is DADA and offensive spells.

Lauren – Prefects being allowed to take off house points is one of those things that JKR has contradicted herself on. In Book 5, the students are shocked when the Inquisitional Squad takes off house points. So in that case, it doesn't seem allowed. But in Book 2, when Harry and Ron are sneaking into the Slytherin common rooms, Percy takes house points off them (posing as Crabbe and Goyle) for wandering the halls. So I think I'm justified in allowing prefects too take off points, by using Book 2 as a reference. Sorry to disappoint you, but Loren is no reference to yourself. I thought of the name because I needed a gender neutral one, and I got the idea from the TV show Angel. You know, the green karaoke demon, Loren? That's where it came from. And Lizzy (short for Elizabeth) was just off the top of my head. If I do put you or your sister in the story, you'll know it.

Fiddy – Although it's true Harry and Ron were issued detentions in Book 2, they didn't serve them until after classes had started. Because my fic starts on a Friday, there's 2 whole days before classes start, and plenty of time to serve detention before then. Snape's threat was "be the first two students to SERVE detention before classes begin." It's just semantics, but I think I am correct with the threat. Good eye though.

Gotta B Writin – I understand your skepticism about Harry being able to overpower Dumbledore in Occulmency, but I was trying to explain the Dumble wasn't expecting a fight from Harry. Think of it as him being caught off balance, and taken by surprise. In time Dumble would have regained his concentration and fought back (and possibly won), but Harry ended the onslaught before that could happen. Now Dumble won't underestimate Harry again. About the first years being too respectful to Harry and Hermione, I think it's totally believable. Even though they're Slytherins, it's the first day of school, and they haven't had the time yet to listen to house prejudices. And even if some of them are junior Death Eaters who hate Harry, they can't disrespect him too much. After all, they're just little 11 year olds, and Harry's a 16 year old prefect. I know 5 years doesn't sound like a lot on paper, but try to remember yourself at those ages. The difference between an 11 years old and a 16 years old might as well be the difference between a child and an adult. The Slytherins may go back to the common rooms to talk bad about him, but I don't think they would do it in front of him without older Slytherins to back them up.

Oomah Loompah & Iris – For some reason, you're not the only ones to ask for personal info about me this review period. I have some on my bio page, but if you want more, than OK. I'm a 25 year old male (straight) who lives in Charlotte, NC. I graduated FSU with a degree in Communication and Film, but have yet to put my studies to use in finding a decent job. I'm a huge movie buff (I own over 500 DVD's), I only like music dated before 1990 (oldies, 80's, and classic rock), and my screen name is RossWrock because I used to love rock climbing. I don't get the chance much anymore, but if given the opportunity I would still love to go. As it so happens, the NC area has some of the best climbing in the country. If you're really dying to see what I look like, there's a photo on my Yahoo! bio page. I don't schedule when I post new chapters, but the rough estimates I do make are posted on my Yahoo! group site. There's a link on my bio page.

Tombadgerlock – I'm sorry you think I'm predictable, but there are a few things wrong with what you think that I'd like to correct. You mentioned that Harry should have accepted the Order of Merlin b/c there might be some benefits. It doesn't matter if it would let him be emancipated or have the right to own to wands, as Harry already has those things. You don't think Vernon cares where Harry's living, do you, as long as he's not at Privet Drive? And he's already got two wands, so he doesn't need another. You also accuse me of changing the past as well as Harry's character. Why I agree I change his character somewhat over a period of time, I've been very dedicated to keeping with cannon. There's nothing in my story that contradicts Books 1-5. If you think there is, let me know, so I can either fix my story, or provide evidence you're wrong. The reason Dumble doesn't know about Hedwig (before Ch. 14 was written) is because Hedwig hasn't been anywhere near Dumble. She's been in London so far, and Dumble's in Scotland. I know he's powerful and very wise, but he's not omnipresent. And the reason why Moody doesn't notice the trunk or Hedwig is because he doesn't take advantage of Harry's privacy. As long as he knows Harry is present and safe (which he does b/c Harry went jogging everyday), there's no reason for him to take a closer look. Even if he did, he has no reason to suspect that the trunk is new, or that it's enchanted. Even if he did notice an enchanted trunk, so what? Harry's a wizard. I doubt that Moody would pay much attention to something so common place. He doesn't

even know that that isn't the trunk Harry's always had. And the detection of magic I've explained already before. Harry's had a counter spell cast on him, as well as drank an antidote to another potion that Dumbledore gives all his students. It's all explained in the Burkes scene in Ch. 5. If you're still confused, reread the section.

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I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving almost 100 reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit the site, which is mentioned on my bio page.

Ross

Chapter 15 – How Harry Spends His Week, Take Two

The meeting with Cami Mitchell that afternoon went better than Harry expected. Actually, it was nice to have a normal, peaceful conversation after the eventful morning he had had, berating the Minister of Magic. As only Hagrid and Professor Dumbledore from the school had been present in town during the press conference, no one yet knew the things Harry had brought to light.

Cami was a shy Hufflepuff, a year younger than him, but not shy enough to not ask questions he felt less than comfortable with. If the two of them were going to be partners for the full year, she said, she really wanted to get to know him. For instance, would he expect her to go off on one of his hair brained adventures if they found something during a patrol? Or should she expect to be bothered by the Slytherins, now that she was partnered up with him?

It was nice to know that she could ask these uncomfortable questions, even if Harry had to struggle to answer them. Besides, the answers were what they both wanted to hear. Harry didn't want her to become any closer than she had to (like Luna and Neville had become close last year), in case she was hurt by association. Harry could maybe except the risk Ron, Hermione, and the others took in being associated with him, but Harry had no inclination for others to put themselves in jeopardy. Cami was likewise pleased. She thought they could be good friends, and patrol partners, and she even admitted to signing up for the DA, but that was as far as she was willing to take any relationship. She didn't want to risk her life, or that of her family, by being too close to him.

After the interrogation given by her, it was Harry's turn to learn some about Cami. He learned she was an average student at best, but hard working and fair, and that was what led to her appointment as prefect. Astronomy and Arithmancy were her two strongest subjects, and her least favorite was Potions. Not an uncommon answer there.

She also admitted to being rather clumsy at times, and told Harry some of the stories she had been through. Getting caught in a trick step at least once a week, falling out of her bed at night and not even knowing it, and accidentally getting dragon dung fertilizer in her

school bag were only some of the things she was willing to tell Harry at first. She promised she'd tell him more as the year went on.

Almost a whole hour after they met in the library, Harry and Cami each took their leave, and went back to their common rooms to wash up for supper. Once there, Hermione and Ron were already actively engaged in a debate about a Herbology assignment, and Harry was able to enjoy a peaceful meal talking to Ginny and Neville.

The next morning during Sunday brunch, Harry didn't have the same luck. The whole school was talking in excitement when he entered the Great Hall, and he soon found out why.

"Harry!" Hermione admonished him. "Why didn't you tell us you went into Hogsmeade yesterday? We have to find out from a newspaper article? Not that I don't love what you've done, but really! You should have told us what you had planned."

"Sorry Hermione," Harry said between bites of his omelet, "I didn't tell anyone what I was up to. No one knew until the press conference. I couldn't risk Fudge hearing anything about my plans. How's the Quibbler article anyways?"

"It's bloody brilliant, mate!" That came from Ron. "Never thought I'd find a newspaper so much fun to read. This is better even than last year's article. They even mention me, by name! Here, take a look."

Harry already knew what the majority of the article would say, but decided to take a break from his porridge and have a read. After all, he had been the one to write the letter to Rita Skeeter three days ago, to give her all the background information.

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The Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, Tells All

By Rita Skeeter

In a shocking press conference held yesterday morning in the sleepy town of Hogsmeade, a scandal the likes this reporter has never seen

broke out, implicating Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge himself among

others. Supposedly in attendance to accept the Order of Merlin, Third Class for his heroic actions in combating Death Eaters and You-Know-

Who himself in a Ministry attack last June, and for working with Ministry personnel, Harry Potter surprised all by refusing the award for his “utter lack of respect for Minister Fudge.”

Fudge, who hadn’t expected a thing until Potter spoke out against him,

was telling bold faced lies about the current state of affairs in relation to crime in our community. The tall tale he made up, about how Harry single handedly fought off a group of Death Eaters to keep them from a prophecy that would increase their master’s supposed weak

power, was a blatant disregard for the real heroes of the night, and an attempt to gain more political power. It’s no secret that Fudge has long attacked the reputation of both Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, and this press conference was an obvious attempt to patch

frayed relations in light of the truth regarding the rebirth of You-Know-Who.

“I wasn’t by myself.” Harry Potter wrote me in an exclusive letter, which contradicts the Minister’s fabricated lies. “I was accompanied to the Ministry building my best mates, Ron Weasley and Hermione

Granger. First we had to get past that hag Umbridge (Delores Umbridge:

still under investigation for her behavior while serving as Fudge’s personally appointed first ever High Inquisitor of Hogwarts), who attempted to use the Cruciatus curse against me, but the three of us managed to outsmart her. There were others who went with me too, but

I’d rather not give their names. He-Whose-Name-Must-Be-Hyphenated

(Harry used the dark wizard’s real name here, but insisted that if we don’t publish it, we at least use this ridiculous name instead) is

cowardly enough to go after anyone to get to me, including supposedly helpless students. If he's supposed to be so powerful and scary, why is it he hasn't ever fought in a fair fight? No, he's got to pick on school kids like me, and even then he can't win. I've faced him (again, Mr. Potter used the name without so much as flinching) four times now, and I've yet to suffer any permanent injuries.

Indeed, young Harry's story, which he promises can be verified by at least a dozen other witnesses including Headmaster of Hogwarts Albus

Dumbledore, went on to shock us even further. Proving Minister Fudge's statement about no one dying at the siege to be false, Harry admitted that his own godfather, escaped convict Sirius Black, died while fighting against, not for, the Death Eaters that night. All this time, while Fudge has convinced the writers at the Daily Prophet and the public at large that Black was the right hand man of You-Know-

Who, he in fact was innocent of his crimes. Furthermore, he was sentenced to a life in Azkaban, under the guard of Dementors, without even a trial.

"The real criminal this whole time has been Peter Pettigrew." Harry again informs me in his letter. "He was my parents' secret keeper when they went into hiding using the Fidelius Charm, and it was he who

told him (the V word again) my parent's location. The only reason people thought Sirius was the secret keeper, was because it was agreed

that he would try to draw attention away from Peter. He was the obvious choice after all, being my father's best friend, so that's why he gladly took the role. He was much more capable of fighting off Death Eaters than Peter ever was, who's still barely above the level of a squib."

If this all sounds like too much to believe, then I agree. I too doubted these accusations without proof. But during the press conference yesterday, proof is exactly what Harry Potter offered. In a stunning turn of events, the least of which was when a beautiful yet

unidentified white phoenix (see story, page 23B) perched on Harry Potter's shoulder, Mr. Potter produced a live Peter Pettigrew from his robe pocket, in his animagus form of a rat.

It seems that Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black, and James Potter all became illegal animagi during their school years to accompany their fourth friend, known werewolf Remus Lupin, during his transformations.

That secret was kept until now, and in his rat form is how Peter Pettigrew managed to escape Ministry notice fifteen years ago, after killing a street full of muggles, and cutting of his own finger to falsely implicate Sirius Black. The same ability is how Sirius Black managed to escape Azkaban three years ago, in his form of a large black dog.

"Sirius told me the dementor's effects were less in his animagus form." Harry explained. "That's how he kept his sanity, and how he eventually escaped Azkaban, and remained a fugitive for three years. The only reason he escaped at all, was because he saw a picture of Pettigrew, in his rat form, in the Daily Prophet posing as my friend Ron's pet. He was afraid Pettigrew was coming after me. 'Scabbers,' as we knew him then, was given to Ron by his older brother Percy Weasley. I find it ironic that such a wanted criminal was kept as a pet by one of the Minister's most trusted aids."

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The article went on for another seven pages after that, and recounted the scene in the Shrieking Shack in Harry's third year, as well as the events as they really happened in the veil room last June. None of the other students or Order members were mentioned by name, but merely reported as "forces working in cooperation with Dumbledore." Harry didn't need to read that part of the article, as he already knew what happened. Writing the letter to Rita had been hard enough, but Harry had no wish to pour more salt on still open wounds.

As soon as brunch ended, the group of friends escaped back up to the common room to avoid the barrage of questions they were being asked. For once, Ron got a taste of what it was like to live life as Harry Potter, and he seemed to be enjoying it. So Harry let him, and

he and Hermione were the first to get away, leaving Ron behind to his adoring public.

“How about some Quidditch practice?” Ginny asked Harry as they settled down on a few couches. Ron had just got back in the common room ten minutes behind the rest, and plopped down with a noisy grunt. “You probably need the practice, don’t you?”

In truth Harry did. It had been almost a full year since he’d flown his broom, not counting the small circles he had flown in his trunk earlier in the summer. McGonagall had given Harry back his Firebolt after his transfiguration class on Thursday, and it was burning a hole in his trunk waiting to be flown. Harry still had to decide if the new broom was as good as his trusty Firebolt.

“Can’t fly today.” Ron let them know. “Hufflepuff has preliminary tryouts on the pitch pretty soon. They need just as many new players as we do, but they’re awfully worried. Speaking of which, we should talk about the team soon Harry. We’re going to need a new captain this year too.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard. Even counting Ginny, there’s only the three of us on the team. Not too many options if you ask me. We still need to wait to meet with McGonagall first though. Let’s put off Quidditch for another week at least. We’ll still have time before tryouts.” Harry knew that Ron wanted the position, and enjoyed teasing the redhead when he got the chance. Harry himself had no time to be the team captain along with all his other duties, so letting Ron control the team was just fine with him.

“What about visiting Hagrid? Didn’t we agree to have tea with him this weekend?” Ginny second suggestion got shot down as well.

“Sorry Gin,” Harry said, “but that was supposed to be yesterday. When he came to the press meeting with me, we agreed to meet next Saturday instead. With the press meeting, there just wasn’t enough time.”

“We’ll I’m going to go do some research in the library.” Hermione let them know. By now, Ginny and Ron were involved in a game of

wizarding chess, and Neville had gone straight to the greenhouses from brunch. "This is my favorite time of year to study. No one else uses the library so soon after summer, and it's nice and peaceful. And I get first dibs on all the books too. Want to join me Harry?"

"No thanks." He said. "I think I'll go upstairs and do some work. I have to set my own lesson plans now for Potions, so I guess I better get that out of the way. See you all later."

Harry really didn't plan on coming up with lesson plans for his potions work, but it was a good excuse. As long as he kept to the same rate of studying as he had over the summer, he'd be fine with the work load. In fact, he'd probably even be far ahead of the rest of his class.

Once upstairs, Harry changed into some comfortable clothes, corduroy pants, a tee shirt, and his Birks, and went right inside his trunk. The first stop he made was his library.

It had been weeks since he had reorganized the bookcases, and he couldn't put it off any longer. All the texts he had read the second half of the summer, along with the ones he had already exhausted, he moved to their proper positions. His sixth year textbooks, which he now had a need for, he brought out from his school bag and placed on the shelves. They hadn't been touched for the most part of the summer, and it was time to rectify that.

His other self was doing something else in another compartment, so Harry had plenty of quiet to read the first few chapters in all his texts. That wasn't a lot considering he had already read most of his Arithmancy and Potions books, so that only left Transfiguration, Charms, and DADA. Harry wanted to get a good jump start on the rest of his class though.

For four straight hours Harry read, not stopping at all. The assigned reading in his classes didn't go past one or two chapters a piece, but Harry read at least the first four. His extra reading had really paid off. Although it was at first boring, the theory of magic books he had purchases really made the difference. Harry was able to pick up new spells and concepts much quicker than he had last year.

When he was done with that, Harry used the trunk's portal to enter the sitting room, where he found Dobby doing some last minute folding. He always did laundry on Wednesdays and Sundays, so that wasn't uncommon. As he was almost finished anyways, Harry didn't feel bad asking Dobby for a game of chess.

Playing chess with Dobby was much more fun than playing with Ron, as Harry found out soon after he hired him. In those first weeks trapped at the Dursleys', Harry had a lot of time to kill, and had decided to teach the elves how to play. He didn't dare use Hermione's nice marble chess set, but instead used a wizarding one he had found in the trunk when he bought it. Dobby probably wouldn't have liked the muggle chess set anyways. He had more fun watching the pieces demolish each other than he did anything else. In fact, Dobby still hadn't gotten the concept of winning. He was too busy directing his pieces into harm's way.

"Wheee! Dobby likes his pawnies getting blown uped. Wheee!" The game ended not long after it started. Harry had managed to stretch the game out to nine minutes this time. That wasn't long, but it was an improvement over how they had started. Harry couldn't believe he'd actually ever get the chance to make a four move check mate, until he had played Dobby.

"Good game Dobby. Is Winky here by the way, or is she at the Hideaway?"

"Winky is back at home, sir. Winky is spending day watching strange sport called curling on the telly. But sport has brooms in which to clean, not to fly, so Winky likes it very much Harry Potter, sir."

The other Harry came into the room right then, as Dobby made his leave. He had magicked the clean, folded clothes to their trunk compartment, and popped away back to Winky, to spend his night off.

"Got time for some dueling before you leave?" The other one asked Harry.

"You tell me." He answered. "You've been through this before, you should know."

The other one smirked. "Well in that case, you do have time. And if I'm not mistaken, you're in for an ass kicking too."

Both Harrys laughed. "We'll see about that."

Once in the dueling chamber, both changed into their workout clothes, the Harrys set to work. They each had some ideas about how to challenge their DADA professor when the time came to duel her, and wanted to try out some stuff before then.

As opposed to when he had three of himselfs to duel, Harry got to use more of his wits and cunning when dueling against only one person. With three, he had to rely more on speed and easy, quick spells to throw his attackers off balance. But Harry vs. Harry, he had to use more of a strategy compared to just quick thinking. It really was exhausting work.

The duel (or duels) lasted over an hour, with both Harrys winning a fair number of the fights. It seemed that in the next week Harry would learn a new curse that caused double vision, because he had been beaten with that by his future self in the last match.

"Want some food?" The victorious future Harry asked his younger self. "I put some steak and kidney pies in the oven earlier, and they should be ready soon."

"Let me jump in the shower first." He answered. "I don't want to be all sweaty when I make the leap. I don't remember you taking a shower last Monday night."

"I didn't." Was the laughing answer. "I had a shower in my trunk before the leap, right before I had some delicious steak and kidney pie."

The hot, steamy shower was just what Harry needed after the intense workout. Leeds really did a good job in designing it. In the past week, Harry hadn't used the dorm or prefect bathrooms once. He was too spoiled by his own.

Dinner was eaten relatively fast. The clock above the table had the time at 7:37, and there was only about twenty minutes until it was time to leave.

Making sure that he had his wand, dagger, holsters and dragon hide vest, and was wearing the same clothing he had seen on himself a week ago, Harry spent the last few minutes thinking about what he would soon learn. He was always a little excited before jumping back in time, to see what he had missed the first time around. Now that he was back at Hogwarts, it would prove to be even more adventurous.

"It's time." His other self reminded him. There was less than a minute till eight o' clock, which was the scheduled departure time. Both Harry's were back in the library now, where they had decided to always make the leaps from. In his hands, the other Harry held a large tomb.

"You know, Hermione would really have it out with us if she knew about this." He said. He was sitting in one of the four study chairs now, and handed the text over to Harry.

"True, but at least we bought it finally. She's only been after us to do so since first year. That's more than Ron's done at least. Even if we haven't read it yet."

Harry was talking about, of course, "Hogwarts: A History," which was the large tomb he held in his hands. Opening it up, Harry carefully took the small time tuner out of its hiding place, an empty hollow carved into the pages of Hermione's favorite read. Once placed back on the bookshelf, Harry had figured it to be one of the best hiding places he could think off. Nobody would ever think to look there, and no one except Hermione would give the book a second look.

With a last goodbye, Harry turned the small hands back six days exactly, and disappeared from sight.

The second Harry, who was now the one in his proper timeline, crawled out of the trunk after taking a shower himself. Ron and Dean were both in the dorm, and asked him about missing dinner, but Harry just shrugged. It wasn't uncommon for a student to skip a meal

on the weekends, and his dorm mates had already seen him crawl into his trunk on more than one occasion. They were all still dying to know what was inside it, but Harry hadn't yet told them. In due time maybe, but not yet.

Meanwhile, six days earlier, Harry, wearing comfortable corduroy pants, a tee shirt, and his Birks, winked into existence in the library. The only noticeable change was the reorganizing of books he'd just completed in the future. Entering into the sitting area, he bumped into his other self, now the earlier version, leaving from talking to Dobby and Winky.

"Hey, aren't we missing someone?" He was asked. This sounded familiar.

"Nope." He replied. "You decided that while at school, you didn't need to push yourself so hard. So we'll only be traveling once each week from now on. Sunday nights at eight o'clock, we go back six days. The current us will worry about classes, the DA, Quidditch practices, prefect patrols, and so on, while the future version of us will keep up with advanced training, and do all our homework for next week. Trust me, it works out great. And boy, are you in for an exciting week!"

Harry laughed at himself, remembering how confused he had been when he had heard this answer, which was certainly how the other Harry was feeling right now. Time traveling still hadn't lost its sense of humor in his opinion, and Harry retreated to his trunk's bedroom as the other climbed back out into the dorm room.

With a quick change of clothes, and after reading fifty pages of a novel and doing his Occlumency exercises, Harry fell asleep after a long day of hard work.

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Tuesday

When he woke up the next morning, after a nice lie in, the other Harry had already been and gone. Because he had to show up to breakfast, plus attend morning classes, Harry had agreed that while living in the

trunk, he would sleep in late to allow the other to have access to the dueling chamber and showers. That way, he could get in a decent workout and have a fresh shower before school started. While that Harry ate breakfast and went to morning class, Harry (the one living in the trunk now) would have free access to everything.

The first thing he did, like every morning, was to start on the treadmill. He walked at first, to stretch his muscles and wake his body up, but then gradually reached a heavy jog. The treadmill didn't have any advanced mechanisms on it, being completely manual (not electric), so Harry didn't even know how fast he was running. He guessed he was running about ten miles an hour. No inclines, no resistance, just plain old fashion running.

After a half hour, Harry got on the floor to do some light exercises. Push ups, sit ups; those type of things. Alone in the privacy of his own trunk, Harry only wore the boxers he had worn to bed the night before. Since they were going in the hamper anyways, it made no sense to dirty another pair of clothes.

The multi functional exercise machine was next, and Harry completed the circuit he had developed months ago. He worked his arms, shoulders, legs, chest, back, and butt. His workout goals weren't to increase muscle mass, but rather to tone and strengthen. For instance, while bench pressing, instead of trying to lift as much weight as possible, Harry instead did large numbers of reps. He was up to lifting eighty lbs. now, and doing three sets of ten reps each. He'd alternate sets so as not to tire his muscles, but the job got done.

After bench pressing the first set, Harry adjusted the weights and worked his arms. The butterfly movement worked his triceps and shoulders. After that were squats, then chin ups, then curls with the free weights, leg lifts, and then he went back to the bench press.

Forty minutes later Harry was done. It amazed him still how much commitment he showed in his daily workout. It had taken a lot of willpower at first to commit to the training regimen. Often after just a few minutes, Harry had felt like throwing in the towel. But he kept at it, and even had Dobby and Winky "spot" him occasionally. Dobby had tried the treadmill once even, and tripped over his large sweater,

losing all seventeen of his knitted hats. They got caught in the conveyer belt, and had taken the rest of the day to get out.

Workout complete, it was his turn in the shower. Thanks to magic, he didn't have to worry about hot water running out or anything. There were extra towels in place, and Harry wrapped one around his waist when he was done.

Winky had breakfast waiting for him in the kitchen, and it was a delicious selection of poached eggs, waffles, kippers, and fresh fruit. One of the benefits to having your own personal house-elf was the attention to detail. Not even the Hogwarts house-elves could be so attending, because they had all the students and staff to look after. For instance, Harry never liked potatoes much, so they rarely made an appearance on his kitchen table. The only kind of potatoes he liked were crisps and chips, because of the salt and flavorings, so that suited him just fine.

With the morning half gone, Harry retired to the library to begin some work. With the reading fresh in his mind still from last night, he decided to knock out the home work he'd been assigned. Just as he told his counterpart last night, it was his job while living in the trunk, to make sure all the homework assignments were completed on time. That way, the other Harry could worry about patrols, Quidditch, attending classes, the D.A., etc. All the Harry in the trunk had to do was homework and advanced training.

He decided to write Rofordit's essay first, as it was the easiest one to write. This wasn't the first time he had had to sum up his defense training for a new DADA teacher, and briefly Harry wondered if he could just use his essay from third year, and add on to it. He thought not.

The essay came easy enough, and Harry had no problem meeting the required eighteen inches. He even went over by a few, doing Hermione proud. This was the one subject he had no problem using details with. The hardest part was keeping his advanced learning separate from the school learning in his essay. All the things he had learned extra, going as far back to his Patronus, he had to keep out

of the paper. He had to be fair to the class after all, as none of them knew as much as he did.

In both Charm and Transfiguration, Harry had to summarize the first chapters in his books, and list some of the spells he wished to learn during the current term. That wasn't hard to do, and he got both assignments done quickly after a short lunch break. Not having to do his Potions homework anymore, and already having done his reading for Arithmancy, Harry was done with his homework for the week. Piece of cake!

"Hey, how was class?" He asked the other Harry, who just entered the room. If he remembered correctly, he had just agreed to meet Ginny early for their first patrol together. They had both left class, and Harry had practically run away from her by accident.

"Not bad. In fact, it was almost too easy. I think we should have stopped studying Arithmancy once we got to a forth year level. I was bored to tears in class. I got some more work done on the stunner though. Although, you already knew that, didn't you?"

Yes he did, but it was still fun to talk to himself. Harry never tried to remember what he had said to himself in the past, so sometimes it was fun to see what struck a note of familiarity, and what came as a total surprise.

"Got some time to spar?" He was asked. Neither Harry had anything to do at the moment, so he agreed. Both changed into their workout robes (with the built in cooling charms), and made their way to the dueling chamber.

For the first twenty minutes, they tossed each other around like rag dolls. Long ago they had felt out their individual limits, and knew how rough they could be without permanently hurting the other. Every once in awhile one suffered from a sprained ankle or broken rib, but those were easy enough to fix with healing spells and the potions Harry kept on hand.

Today, Harry got the advantage early on over his younger self. Distracted by Dobby who had popped in to watch, Harry grabbed the

collar of the other's robes, and neatly flipped him over his knee. The padded ground cushioned the fall, but Harry didn't wait to follow up on the attack.

Placing his foot over the other's arm, Harry grabbed the other's wrist, twisting it around his leg, and then sat down on the floor. The leverage Harry now had on the twisted appendage was applied full force, and the second Harry was in no position to get out of the submission move. After his opponent tapped out, Harry let go of the hold.

"Nice one!" He got complemented on. "Where did that come from?"

"Just now." Harry answered. "I'll show you a few more times this week. You'll be able to avoid it by Thursday."

Dobby had to leave, and with no more distractions, the fighting was much more evenly matched after that. There was no clear winner in the other bouts, but each got a good workout, and learned some new moves.

"OK, it's time. Ready?" Harry hated to hear this question, but knew he had no choice.

"Yeah, just go easy, would you. It's been over a week since we did this." Harry stood in front of the other, breathing deeply and waiting for the curse to come. He also took a ping pong ball from the shelf, which he had conjured weeks ago. That was his failsafe.

"OK, here we go. Three, two, one....Crucio!"

The pain wasn't as bad as it had been one month ago, but it still hurt like a bitch. After Harry had enough practice throwing off the tickling charm, they had switched to the Cruciatus. Everyday since then, with the exception of his first week back at Hogwarts, Harry spent a half hour cursing himself with the Cruciatus, trying to build up an immunity. It was working a little so far, but not much. Only twice had Harry been able to cast a spell through the immense pain the curse simulated.

Sharp knives dragged their way across every inch of his body, making shallow but painful cuts in their paths. Hot pokers were forced into his joints, making them burn and scream, causing Harry to collapse to the floor. Salt was rubbed in his wounds, reminding him of the pain, and causing greater harm. These were but some of the feelings he endured, as he held onto that ping pong ball with all the concentration he could muster. Both the ball, and his wand in his other hand, were the only two things he concentrated on.

The object, of course, was to cast a spell through the pain, so he'd be able to end the curse if a real situation ever presented itself. But he also had to keep his sanity, and that's where the ping pong ball came in. Harry had to concentrate not to drop it, or else the curse would stop. That was their signal, in case the pain ever became too much, or in case the curse was held too long.

This time however, Harry managed to hold onto the ball. Usually he would drop it about two minutes after dropping to his knees, which was another two minutes after the curse began. When he first started, Harry only held the curse on himself for at most thirty seconds. Over time, he extended that. Voldemort wouldn't be so unforgiving, so Harry forced himself to not be either.

"Ex-Expelliarmus!" He managed to say after god knows how long of being torn apart. Immediately the pain stopped, and Harry felt a dull thump on his chest, which was his opponent's wand being summoned to him. He managed to stay on his knees, but only barely.

Soon he felt a vial pushed to his lips, and drank what he knew would make him feel better. The potion to counter the effects of the Cruciatus was perhaps his most used potion, and Harry always made sure he had a liberal supply on hand. The pain dulled, feeling came back to his limbs, and within a minute, Harry was back on his feet.

"Congratulations. That's the third time now we've been able to cast a spell through the Cruciatus. How did it feel that time?"

Leaning against the wall, Harry found his voice, and tried to explain what he had felt.

"It started the same." Harry explained to the other. "At first the pain just assaulted me, and I didn't know what was happening. I concentrated on my hand, so as not to drop the ball, and soon my vision went. You know; blackness everywhere, only a dim light at the end of the tunnel. But then I started to concentrate on the pain, instead of trying to ignore it. I tried to split up the different feelings I was experiencing, and then I only concentrated on one of those. This time, I chose the dull pain. It felt like Dudley was beating me over every inch of my body, but at least it wasn't a sharp, searing pain, like knives or burning. Once I got that dull pain in my head, I was able to ignore the others. It still hurt, a lot, but then all of a sudden I was able to cast a spell. I think that might be the key; trying to segment the feelings, instead of trying to overcome them. I don't remember what happened the other two times I fought through the spell, but this worked better than those times I think."

"I agree. Since you haven't done this in over a week, why don't we stop here today. We'll work more later. I got to go get ready for supper anyways. See you tomorrow."

A friend might have stayed to see Harry through the full recovery of the pain spell, but since the man leaving the trunk wasn't a friend, but a version of Harry himself, he didn't. He already knew Harry could handle himself, and would make a full recovery within an hour.

Normally, both Harrys would take turns casting the curse on each other. But because one Harry had to make appearances in class and at meals, it would look awkward if he showed up still feeling the lingering effects of an unforgivable curse. So while at school, it was agreed that only the Harry living in the trunk would have the spell cast against him. He'd have a week full of practice, then a week of rest. Not a bad schedule, considering.

After a second shower, followed by a soak in the tub for his aching joints, Harry made his way back to the sitting room area. Dinner was still more than an hour away, and he spent the time doing some light reading, and talking with Dobby and Winky.

The elves made numerous trips back and forth between London and the trunk each day, but since they only had to pop back and forth, it

wasn't anymore trouble than walking into a different room. And they always seemed to know when Harry required their company. Amazing beings, house-elves were.

Dinner was just as delicious as always, and all three enjoyed it together this time. It had taken a lot of effort to get the elves, Winky especially, to join him in his meals, but they had finally relented. "Only because Mister Harry Potter is alone, and needing company," they said, but Harry liked to think differently. He liked to think they were becoming more friends than employer/employee.

After supper, Harry went back to his library to make a list of what he wanted to accomplish over the next few days. With his homework done, he had a lot more free time now.

Three hours later he was done. With tomorrow's plans all set, Harry retired for the night. Once more, after some pleasure reading and Occlumency exercises, Harry tucked himself into his king sized sleigh bed, and cast a "Nox" to dim the lights, put his wand on the bedside table, and went to sleep.

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Wednesday

After his workout, late breakfast and shower, Harry got to work on the list he had made the night before. Knowing that he'd turn in Wormtail later that week, and that presently the rat was still locked in a cage back in London, Harry made that his first order of business.

The seventh compartment of his trunk; the large, empty room covered in stone surfaces, was Harry's first destination. Until now it had been left empty, and in fact, Harry had only ever been in it twice. The first time to take a look around, and the second, when he had tested out his new broom.

Now he had to use the space though, in a way he had been planning on for quite some time. Harry trusted Dobby and Winky to look after one single prisoner back home, but no more than that. And since

Harry's plan was to have more than one, he had to have a place to put them. Time to redecorate.

The next two hours, Harry spent creating stone walls in the large room, forming cells, about the same size as Wormtail's. Because he had already done this once, it didn't take a lot of research or trial and error, just time.

Harry started off creating ten cells, all along the shorter wall in the back of the room. Each stone wall that separated the cells were a foot thick, and charmed to be soundproof. Harry added a ceiling as well, as the room was too tall otherwise. He's didn't want to give Wormtail or any others a vaulted ceiling. This was a prison cell, and was meant to be uncomfortable.

The front of the cells each had a door, four inches thick made of solid oak, also charmed to be soundproof. They had an additional charm though, to make them see through as well. That way, Harry could see into the cells by muttering a simple word. The doors weren't transparent from the inside, so the finished product was like a one way mirror, only with no refection on the other side. He could have used his magic lens to see through the doors of course, but that took active concentration. If Harry charmed the doors see through, it would be less taxing on him.

Furnishing the cells took only a few minutes. Each got a thin mattress pad, which was secured by magic to the floor, so it couldn't be used for any other purposes. A thin blanket was folded at the end of each bed, and there was a bucket too, in a far corner. The famous bucket.

Remus had thought the bucket was a bit medieval, as mean of using as a toilet. But Harry had no practice making indoor plumbing, either using magic or without, so that was the best he could do really. Once a day he'd have to go by to vanquish any waste the buckets might contain, but that was their only upkeep. When he delivered food and water twice a day, he'd give any unfortunate persons who occupied the cells some extra water to wash up too.

In London, Wormtail was given some muggle paperbacks to read; the only way to spend his time. Harry had bought them in a bookshop

early on, and had about twenty novels so far. Those he had, he brought out from his library, and made a separate shelf for in the seventh compartment, which Harry realized he now was thinking of as his “prison.” Twenty novels wouldn’t last much longer, and Harry made a note to himself about getting some more at the first chance he got.

With the structural building complete, Harry took a break for lunch. The elves weren’t around for this meal, so Harry made do with a sandwich and a butterbeer. His original supply had run out a long time ago, but Harry had sent Dobby for more. There were now five cases of eighty bottles of butterbeer stashed in his pantry, and that would last a long time.

After lunch, Harry went back to his prison and started the second stage of the building; the spells. Besides the soundproofing and one-way sight spells, which had to be cast on the materials when they were created, Harry still had a lot to do.

The first spell Harry cast was one he learned from the auror handbook he had bought. It was a standard ward used for interrogation rooms, holding cells, and all prisons. It basically was a suicide prevention spell; it made it impossible for anyone to harm themselves without the aid of magic. If one had a wand, they could probably overcome the spell, but Harry was sure to properly search anyone before putting them in the cells. He still had Wormtail’s wand in his trunk’s second compartment. Remus had left it with him that night after the attack, and it hadn’t been mentioned since.

Next came the anti-apparition wards, which weren’t Harry’s strong suit. He had tried casting the spells on his apartment building when he first moved in, and wasn’t able to. Then he tried just to cast it on his floor, and again was unsuccessful. They were some of the hardest wards to erect, and Harry still had little experience. Only when Wormtail was captured, and they needed to make sure he didn’t escape, had Harry successfully cast the ward. That time, it had just been around the small cell Wormtail occupied. Now, months later, Harry thought he might be able to cast the ward over all ten cells at once, but he didn’t want to take that chance. He already knew it was possible to apparate out of his trunk if the lid was open, and Harry

didn't want to take any chances. He cast the ward ten separate times over each of the cells.

Harry looked everywhere through his books for a spell to prevent the animagus transformation, but he never was able to find one. The best he could come up with was the spell to transform an animal back to a human, like the one he used on Wormtail at the press meeting. No matter, the cells he had made were air tight, which led to his next need.

A spell to circulate the air was cast on all the cells, so occupants wouldn't suffocate to death. Not that that would be a bad thing necessarily, but Harry didn't want to be responsible for any undeserving deaths. He'd much rather see them suffer. If a Death Eater happened to die by accident, then fine, as long as it hadn't been caused by him.

After that, most of the spell work was done. The rest was all strictly for decoration and effect. A full set of chains and shackles got conjured, one to be attached to the far wall of every cell. Harry also stained the stone walls with some rust colored markings, to make it look like blood. It wasn't real of course, but any Death Eaters lucky enough to find themselves prisoner wouldn't know that. Harry hoped to convince them that they were imprisoned in a far less forgiving space than a school boy's magic trunk. Since his trunk was a one of a kind, Harry thought it would work.

It was mid afternoon by the time Harry had finished. Each cell was even more secure than his original back at the Hideaway, and Harry couldn't think of another way to improve them. Time to test them out.

Using the portal to travel back into the sitting room, Harry found Dobby and Winky in the kitchen, preparing supper. Breakfast and dinner were the two meals they usually cooked for him while locked in the trunk, and lunch he had to fend for himself.

"Winky?" Harry asked. "Has Wormtail been fed a meal yet today?"

"Yes Master Harry Potter, sir. Dirty evil wizard has been fed and bucket cleared. Crying was heard from his cell last night again, but

Harry Potter said not to do anything besides clean and feed nasty man, so Winky did nothing about crying. Is there something Winky can do for you?"

"Yes, I need to bring Wormtail here. I'm moving him, so you'll no longer have to look after him. But I can't use a portkey to bring him into Hogwarts, and I can't leave this trunk either. I was wondering if you could pop him here with you. You can stun him first, just to make sure he doesn't cause trouble."

Winky had a horrified look on her face. It was possible for her to bring others with her when she popped, the elf version of apparition, but it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

"Oh no, Master Harry Potter, sir. Winky must not bring wizard or witch that way. Popping is very painful for witches and wizards, sir. Cruel man would not be liking that, no he wouldn't."

"Winky," Harry explained, "I know that it will hurt him, but no permanent damage done, right? Anyways, I need to get him here, and this is the only way I can think of right now. I can't make a portkey for him to use, because that might alert Professor Dumbledore. I'll have to check that out in the future. And I'd go get him myself if I could, but I can't leave the trunk to fetch him. So please, can you do it this once? I promise I won't ask again."

If Winky wouldn't agree, Harry wasn't worried. Dobby surely would, and he was but a finger snap away. If worst came to worst, the other Harry could always sneak out a secret passage, apparate to the Hideaway, and stun Wormtail then, bringing him back in his pocket as a rat. That would take too long though. Besides, he never did that last week, so that's why he knew either Winky or Dobby would bring Pettigrew.

"Alright sir, Winky will do just this once. But I is telling you, hurt really good this will. Shall I go now, Master Harry Potter, sir?"

'Whenever you're ready Winky. Bring him back here please; I'll be waiting.'

With a last look of horror on her face, Winky closed her eyes and snapped her fingers, disappearing in a puff of smoke. She was gone for over a minute, and Harry spent that time drawing his wand, and waiting for their return.

The second they showed up, Wormtail screamed out in agony, and Winky hurried away, hiding behind the legs of her master. Wormtail's pain caused him to break out of whatever elf body bind he had been in, and he crumpled to the floor. Still in pain, he looked around at his new surrounding. But Harry stunned him before he got more than a glimpse of the room. Then he stunned him a second time, just for good measure.

After that, it was simply a matter of hauling the limp body through the portal, into the "prison" compartment, and unlocking the closest cell. Harry felt no compassion as he threw his captive in, and threw the solid oak door shut, making sure it was locked with both a spell, and the heavy iron bolt fastened on the outside. There was no way Pettigrew was worming his way out of this cell.

Winky had gone already when Harry returned to the nicer compartment, and she obviously forgot to bring the muggle paperbacks with her too. No matter, it was a trying day for her. And Harry had forgotten to remind her. Dobby would have to bring them in the morning.

The male house-elf had left as well, but had left dinner warming in the oven. Another culinary delight, much tastier than the gruel Wormtail had been eating this past month. Dobby had prepared a chicken dish with what Harry suspected was goat cheese, drizzled with balsamic vinegar. It assaulted Harry's senses, but in a good way. Two breasts were polished off before Harry knew it, and he spent time savoring the flavor of the third. A forth chicken breast was left over, which Harry wrapped up and put in the cooler, just perfect for a late night snack, or a light lunch. Those house- elves thought of the littlest things.

After dinner, Harry read some more of the advanced books he had purchased in Diagon Alley. He was concentrating on mainly offensive spells now, and he wasn't afraid to study some of the darker choices

that he came across. Harry still had not attempted any of the truly dark art pain curses, or the foreign equivalent unforgivables, but those were the only items Harry drew the line at. Everything else was fair game.

He stayed up much later than normal that night, and had no time for pleasure reading, but fell asleep content nonetheless, after fifteen minutes of his meditation.

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### Thursday

Morning was the same. It always is. Wake up, run on the treadmill, work out, take a shower, then eat breakfast. Sometimes the monotony did get to Harry, but he pushed that feeling back. What he was doing was necessary, and in just a few days, he'd be back among the living, with all his friends and teachers.

Before lunch he filled his time in the dueling chamber, practicing some of the new curses he had read about last night on the practice dummies. They had got old too, but they were still dead useful. They just stood there, not moving, taking the full brunt of the spells. The first few weeks Harry had tried the dodging feature they were installed with, but that was ridiculous. He didn't know if it was because the dummies were two decades old, or because he was just ahead of their level, but the dummies couldn't manage to avoid his simplest attacks. They would be great against a toddler, but even a first year muggle-born would be able to hit the targets nine times out of ten. It didn't bother Harry much. When it came to a worthy opponent able to dodge curses, he had his other self to practice on.

One of the dummies was already damaged beyond repair, or rather, burnt beyond belief. Harry had gotten a little over excited with an incendiary spell awhile back, and the doll's inherent magic was unable to fix the damage. It was still useable, but the spell gauge no longer worked, and it looked rather ragged. Harry always made sure to try out new spells on that dummy first, to not chance damage to any other. That had only increased the beat up look to the doll, but at least it protected the others.

A salad and the leftover chicken was what Harry had for lunch, and this time instead of a butterbeer, Harry had a glass of lemonade to drink. Variety was nice every now and again.

After lunch, the other Harry popped back over for another round head to head. Because he always had only one class in the afternoons, and the two other periods were free for him, he always made the time for some sparing or dueling in the afternoons. Yesterday was an exception, because he had to construct the cells. So today they were back on schedule. They alternated with the dueling and the sparing, and today was more muggle fighting. Harry showed the submission move he had used on Tuesday again, and true to his word, by the end of the session, both were able to apply and avoid it.

Another round of the Cruciatus followed, but this time he was shown no mercy. They went a full half hour, with Harry being subjected to the curse six times, before they quit for the day. He drank six restorative potions as well, and that was the limit one should drink at any one time. Twice he had fought through the pain to disarm his attacker, and that was high success as far as Harry was concerned. He felt proud of himself, no matter how much he hurt, as he took a long soak in the bathtub.

After dinner, rather than pick up on the reading he had left off on last night, Harry entered into his potions lab. He felt bad that Dobby and Winky had to share the smelly room when they were here, but at least now they had a more comfortable place to stay. Harry hadn't set foot into the elves' room after he presented it to them back at the Hideaway, so he assumed they either enjoyed it, or had changed it to their liking. As a result, the curtain opposite his cauldron tables was taken down, but there was still a workspace and two small cots off to the side. When the elves were in the trunk, they still needed a place to do their work, or to rest if they wanted. Dobby had gotten hooked on infomercials last month, and sometimes stayed up late to watch them. He had a habit of dozing off during work, and sometimes needed a short nap to get him through the day.

Currently, Harry only had one potion brewing; Veritaserum. It was almost impossible to brew, and took a full lunar cycle too. Before now

Harry had been using more simple truth serums, but attempted the stronger one three and a half weeks ago. It had been simmering in his copper cauldron since, and he had to periodically add ingredients and stir the clear liquid. He didn't know if he got it right yet, as he still had to wait almost another week. He was trying to get it done to use on Wormtail, but now that he knew he'd be releasing the rat on Saturday, Harry knew that won't be. He'd have to find something else.

The problem was, if Wormtail was handed over to the Ministry on Saturday, what was preventing him from telling them about Harry? More specifically, his ability to cast a golden patronus, and the less than legal methods he had taken to capture the man who betrayed his parents. Harry had gone a full four weeks without trading more than three words with the man, but now it was time to talk. Harry had to know exactly what Wormtail had seen that night, and had to find a way to make him keep quite.

As he thought about his possibilities, Harry added the necessary ingredients to the Veritaserum, and started to brew more of the potion for the Cruciatus. Man, he used a lot of that stuff. Luckily, it was an easy potion to make, and it kept in storage for a long time too. This was only the third batch Harry had to make.

With the potion soon complete, and the Veritaserum back on a slow simmer, Harry cleaned his workspace, replaced his instruments, and did a final washing up for the night. He felt like taking a shower, but that would have been his third for the day. There was such thing as overkill.

Another seventy pages later in his fiction, Harry put the book aside. It was a good story; a tale about a young wizard apprentice, who had to impersonate his teacher when the old wizard accidentally blew himself up in a potions accident. The young wizard had to face down a dark lord (not nearly as evil as Voldemort) to uphold the honor of his teacher, and along the way, win the heart of the witch he loved. It was mostly an adventure piece, but had a fair smattering of romance. Harry knew it was silly, really, but sometimes he wished his life were as simple as in the fairytales. His life was more of a nightmare.

Filing those thoughts into their appropriate subsets, and finishing his Occlumency training for the night, Harry turned out the lights, and rolled over on the large bed, waiting for sleep to find him.

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Friday

Morning, the same. Lunch, not the same, but similar. Only in the afternoon did this day turn out any different from the day before. When Harry's counterpart came back from his afternoon Potions lesson, he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Had fun with Snape, did we?" Harry asked innocently.

"That was the most fun I've had all year long!" Was the answer. "I've never seen Snape so livid. It was better than Quidditch! I almost wish I could tell Ron and Hermione about this, but I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't tell a soul. I don't know how you didn't tell me about this all week long."

"It was hard." Harry answered. Thinking back on the incident now, it really was. How he had wished to be able to share the scene with some of his friends. Or even Remus, who admittedly Harry had bumped into only once since school started. Remus was doing some last minute errands for Dumbledore while the D.A. still hadn't been set up, and he had promised Harry a time next week to sit down and talk about it.

As his double got changed into some grey robes, ready for some exercise, Harry thought back to how that scene in the Headmaster's office played out, and how much worse it could have been.

****FLASHBACK****

"How dare he do that!" Harry thought to himself as he tore up the stairs, making his way to Dumbledore's office. He had managed to keep his cool in the potions classroom, most of it, but now on his own, his anger was getting the best of him.

"He was going to attack me! Remove my bones and force me to drink that vile potion. Even if I did get it correct, which I know Susan and I did, it still wouldn't have been right. And knowing Snape, he would have used someone else's potion instead 'accidentally,' and made me suffer anyways. The git!" All these thoughts Harry had to himself, climbing out of the dungeons into the empty hallways. Everyone else was still in class, and not even a ghost was around to take his anger out on. Boy, would he love to bump into Peeves right about now.

"Come in, Harry." He didn't even know how he had gotten to Dumbledore's office so quickly. If he didn't know better, he thought he might have used a bit of accidental magic to walk extra fast.

"To what do I owe this pleasure? Shouldn't you be in class right about now? Potions, I believe." Harry had just taken a seat, not because he felt more comfortable, but because he didn't want to wear a hole in the rug, pacing back and forth.

"I just left there, sir. I was kicked out of class. Or rather, I kicked myself out of class."

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling with mirth, even though they shouldn't have. If he knew the actions Harry took, he wouldn't be joking.

"And what caused you to remove yourself from class, Harry? And how did Professor Snape manage to prevent you from leaving? I dare say, the only way he would have let you out of class, was if it were his idea to begin with. He no doubt wouldn't allow it if the credit could be given to you. No, Professor Snape wouldn't have enjoyed that one bit."

Harry starred at his hands. His last conversation with Dumbledore had gone nothing like this. He once again felt like he had just been sent to the principal's office, just like those many times in primary school.

"Snape didn't have a choice." Harry muttered.

"What was that Harry?"

"I said, Snape didn't have a choice. When I left, he was still in the body bind I put him in. I left Hermione in charge of the class, and told her to release him after I left. No doubt, he's on his way here now."

"That's Professor Snape, Harry." His eyes were still twinkling, unbelievable. "And those are serious actions you claim to have taken. Would you care to tell me why you felt it necessary to curse your Professor?"

Harry mumbled again, and had to restate his answer. "Because Professor Snape was going to remove my bones, to make me test the Skele-Gro we brewed the other day. He always picks on me, and I told him no this time. I wasn't going to let him remove my pelvis. My pelvis for god's sake, and drink that nasty stuff! So when I refused, politely I might add, he threatened me with force, and went to pull his wand. I petrified him before he could. Then I punished myself in front of the class, and then I left. I'm surprised Snape's not here already."

"Professor Snape, Harry." Dumbledore corrected him again. "And I believe that's him, storming up my stairs now."

Harry turned his head and had a look for himself. Sure enough, with the aid of his x-ray lens, Harry got a glimpse at one pissed off potions master.

Snape didn't even wait for an invite into the office, but instead threw the door open, and burst into the office with his black cloak billowing behind him.

"Albus, what has this arrogant brat been telling you? I've put up with his stunts for far too long. I demand that he be expelled for attacking me! This has gone on long enough!"

"Sure has." Harry swore under his breath. He of course, was talking about Snape's attitude in potions class, which had been sour since Harry's first day at Hogwarts.

"Shut up Potter!" Snape screamed. "Don't you think you've done enough for one day? Just like your father, I swear! I knew from day

one that you wouldn't amount to more than a pain in my backside, but you've gone too far now. Don't think you won't get what you finally deserve for this."

"Severus, calm down." That was Dumbledore, who at least had enough sense to not offer up any candy at the moment. "Why don't you take a seat and tell me what happened. Harry had time to tell me only a little, and I'd like to hear what happened from you."

Snape didn't sit down, but he did tell his story. Story, being the operative word. By the way he made it sound, Harry had been out for his blood that day. According to Snape, he had just been going about class as usual, when Harry rose out of his seat for no reason, wand in hand, and used it against him. Then he had threatened him at wandpoint, and left after cursing the Slytherins as well."

"That's not true!" Harry interrupted. "I only disarmed them when they drew their wands. And it was only Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle; not all the Slytherins. The rest were fine, I never touched them!"

"You expect the Headmaster to believe that, Potter? It's well known that you hate all Slytherins, and who do you think he'll believe? Me, a member of his staff for over ten years, or you, who's been known to constantly break rules. You always think you're better than everyone else!"

"Shut up! You're the one always thinking that, not me! Why don't you just shut the bloody hell up!" Harry was really loosing it now.

"Harry! That's no way to talk to a professor. Please apologize to Professor Snape for your use of language." Dumbledore was afraid he'd have to split these two up if things became more heated. Cautiously, he moved his wand in hand in case the situation arose.

Harry fumed silently for a few moments getting his temper back under control, and Snape likewise took the time to get a grip on himself. It wouldn't be wise to throttle a student in the presence of the school headmaster.

"Sorry I used bad language." Harry mumbled. He couldn't bring himself to apologize for more.

"Do you have a different version of how things transpired, Harry? If so, now's the time to say. As it stands, you're in for some very serious punishments."

"I already punished myself." Harry said. At Dumbledore's raided eyebrows, he explained more. "When I put Snape in a body bind, I knew I was breaking school rules. So I voluntarily took 25 points from Gryffindor, and I convinced Hermione, Draco, and Susan Bones to take 25 points as well. I also volunteered myself for a week's detention, as long as it's not with him." Harry gestured at Snape. "I said I'd serve with Mr. Filch, but anyone would be fine really."

Dumbledore thought about that, and privately was surprised at Harry's decision. It was very adult-like, and proved that he truly deserved to wear the prefect badge he had missed out on last year. Dumbledore was glad that he got the chance to rectify the problem.

"I admire your decision to punish yourself Harry. It was deserved, and I dare say the punishment doled out is more than fitting for the crime. However, the fact that you still attacked your teacher needs to be addressed. If anything, the fact that you admitted your indiscretion and sentenced punishment could be argued that this was all premeditated."

"But it wasn't!" Harry pleaded. "I told you, he was going to remove my bones, and force me to drink Skele-Gro. When I politely refused, he threatened me, and went to draw his wand. The whole class saw it! That's the only reason why I acted. It was self defense."

'Really!' Snape snorted. "Do you expect us to believe that I'd force an unsafe potion on a student after removing a bone, and threaten that student if he refused? What kind of idiot are you, Potter?"

"That's enough, Severus. You had your say, now I'd like to hear Harry's version of things."

"How about I show you?" Harry asked. It was just a random idea, but he was thinking about maybe using a pensieve, either his or Dumbledore's, to show the Headmaster his memory. Thinking more clearly, he had a better idea.

"What do you mean, show us?" Snape was getting a little nervous.

"Headmaster, remember what you did last week in this office, which I didn't take too kindly? Do that again, and I'll show you how potions class went." Even as he said this, Harry was gathering the memories in his head, pushing them all into a single subset. They were recent enough to call upon quickly, and Harry even added in the class he had on Wednesday. No doubt Dumbledore would be amused by Harry's quirks to Snape about his headgear, but he'd also get a chance to see how Snape always went after him, never anyone else.

Wand still in hand, Professor Dumbledore raised it to point to Harry, with the twinkle back in his eye. In the background Snape was demanding to know what they were talking about, but neither Harry nor Dumbledore heard him. They were too focused on each other's eyes.

"Legilimens."

Again, Harry felt the cold fingers probing his mind, this time in full force. Dumbledore wasn't trying to sneak into his head this time, and he had spoken the curse aloud, so it made sense the feeling was much stronger. Still, Harry brought up his inner defense walls, just in case Dumbledore tried to take advantage of his hospitality, and brought out the memories he had arranged. They began with Wednesday's class.

The whole class passed in front of his eyes, yet only a few seconds passed. In an odd way, Harry could almost sense when Dumbledore became amused, and when he became displeased. The sensation of cold fingers changed for each emotion he felt, both in texture and in temperature. It was hard to describe.

After that class ended, the next one began. Harry had stored much more detail in this memory, both because it had just happened a

short while ago, and because he was actively involved in it. He could be wrong, but Harry thought he sensed a lot less amusement, and a lot more anger from the feelings he associated with Dumbledore. Beyond anger even, maybe disappointment.

When the memory ended, and Harry stormed out of the classroom after leaving Hermione in charge, Dumbledore withdrew from Harry's mind voluntarily. Harry was still seated, and it only took a few seconds to recollect himself, and draw his attention to Dumbledore's face. He didn't look pleased.

"Severus, I am disappointed in you. Please stay after Mr. Potter leaves to discuss this further. Harry, I think we'll let the punishment stand. Our only problem now, is what to do about your Potions lessons. Clearly, it would be very hard for the two of you to work together again. But unfortunately, Professor Snape is the only one qualified to teach NEWT preparation classes. Do you have any thoughts?"

"What just happened? What did that boy show you? It's lies I say, nothing but lies!" Snape was screaming again, clearly displeased at how things had turned out.

"How am I supposed to lie in a memory, huh Snape?" Harry asked. He was starting to like this. The fact that no one corrected how he addressed the older man only further satisfied Harry. "That's almost impossible in Occlumency. Besides, according to you, I don't even have the skills to block out another person, much less redirect a thought."

"Shut up, you insufferable brat! That's another thing, Albus. Potter never showed up for his Occlumency lesson Thursday night. Why do you insist I waste my time if he won't even show up when he's supposed to." Snape might have been trying to change the topic, and blame something else on Harry, but Harry didn't care. He turned to look at Dumbledore.

"I think I made it very clear already that I don't need any lessons. Besides, I never agreed to them in the first place. You went ahead and made the decision without me, even after I swore last year I

wouldn't do them with Snape again. I don't think I should be penalized for skipping lessons you know I never intended to show for, nor agreed with."

"What in blazes is he babbling about?" Again, Snape had to know everything.

"It seems Severus," Dumbledore explained, "that our young Harry became quite the Occlumency expert this past summer, as I had the unfortunate pleasure of finding out last week. I don't know where he got his instruction from, but he has far surpassed the level we require of him. I doubt Voldemort will pose a threat to Harry's mind again."

"Nonsense! How am I supposed to believe that? I took three years learning the art, and that was under your direct supervision. I refuse to accept that Potter has reached a sufficient level."

"Maybe I'm just smarter than you are." Harry muttered. It was loud enough to be heard though, which Harry later wasn't sorry about.

"Why you little...." Snape had had enough. No pompous brat was going to insult him, especially after humiliating him in front of his students. "Let's just see how advanced you are, Potter. Legilimens!"

Harry was totally unprepared for the assault, but luckily that didn't matter. His training would protect him, plus his inner sphere walls were still up to maximum alert from Dumbledore's entrance. Snape was fishing without bait.

Rising out of his chair to face Snape, Harry quickly thought of what he could use against him. The time was moving by slowly, with Snape sifting through meaningless memories, thinking he had full access to Harry's mind. He'd show him. Harry had just come up with the perfect thought to use, and boy was it a doozy.

Part of the subset of what he felt ashamed about knowing, was the memory of Snape as a child; hanging upside down, being teased by Sirius and his father. Quickly, before Snape could pull out of his mind, Harry separated that thought, and pushed it full force into the outer layer of his mind. When it hit Snape, both Harry and Dumbledore

recognized the signs. Snape's eyes slammed shut, he staggered and fell to his knees, and he dropped his wand.

Normally, that would have ended the spell. But for some reason, it didn't this time. Perhaps it was because, as Snape relived the "Snivilus! Snivilus!" teases from his youth; the graying underwear and humiliation he had felt; he was actually reliving one of his own memories. Not the foreign memory of Harry. In a way, Harry soon realized, he was now performing Legilimency on Snape. Because the memory had not originally belonged to him, he was able to turn the tables on Snape.

What was even more impressive, was that while Snape continued to suffer the assault, Harry was able to access more of the man's mind. He was still a weak Legilimens, but had enough practice against the Dursleys to sift for thoughts. He couldn't pull out any additional memories, but he did feel what Snape was planning. Little did he know, Harry would be prepared.

Moving his hands behind his back, Harry drew his wand, and pointed it towards the floor, casting a rebounding charm. Snape couldn't see it from his vantage, and if Dumbledore noticed it, he didn't let on.

Once the charm was in place, and Harry had touched a small button on his watch (still behind his back), he let the memory assault fade. He pulled back little by little, until Snape was able to push the rest of Harry's mind away himself. He took an additional minute to realize he was on the floor and had dropped his wand, but soon enough he was back on his feet, with daggers shooting out of his eyes. Dumbledore hadn't said a word since the attack began.

"You little shite! Flipendo!" Dumbledore was more surprised than Harry, and made to block the spell, but it was too late. It had already traveled the short distance across the room, and hit Harry dead on the chest. If it hit correctly, it probably would have knocked Harry clear across the rest of the room, and halfway through the wall. Madame Pomfrey no doubt would have had a patient for the next few days to say the least. Luckily though, the spell fizzled out on Harry's chest. His dragoon hide vest helped block the curse, as did the shield charm he had activated from his watch moments ago. One of the

watch's functions, Harry had read months ago, was a shield charm that would encompass the body, and work for most mild offensive spells. It had to be recharged after every use of course, but it was still as powerful as any other shield charm. The small button Harry pressed behind his back had activated the shield, and it had stopped the curse beautifully.

Before Snape had the chance to attack again, Harry brought out his wand this time, and pointed it at the floor. Snape paused momentarily confused, but reacted when Harry voiced a complex restraint spell. As expected, he forwent the simple "Protego," which wouldn't have worked against the powerful restraint spell anyways, for a more complex and powerful shield spell. Unlike the Protego charm, this version of the shield spell conjured up a physical barrier to block spells. Voldemort had used something similar during his battle with Dumbledore, at the Ministry building last June. Voldemort's shield then had been silver, and Snape shield was now brown, but it didn't matter. The shield failed all the same.

Because Harry's spell wasn't aimed at Snape; it was aimed at the floor in front of him. And thanks to the simple rebounding charm he had cast already, the spell bounced off the floor harmlessly, and hit Snape dead center from a downward angle. He was out for the count.

The restraint spell Harry used he had learned just two weeks ago. It was one of the most powerful ones available, and had the advantage of restraining both a wizard's hands and feet, as Snape soon found out.

Just after the spell hit Snape in the waist, four silver blurs traveled from the impact point, and headed towards each limb. Once at his hands, the silver blurs formed metal gauntlets around his wrists. The same was happening at his ankles, with the metal bands cutting through the black robes with ease. Once all four metal bands were secure, they tightened significantly. So hard in fact, that Snape was forced to drop his wand. Then, with a final flick from Harry's wand, the metal bands' magnetism kicked in, and all four bands snapped together.

It was quite funny really. It looked more like Snape doing a reverse jumping jack than anything else. His two hands jerked down together in front of him, so now his wrists were touching. At the same time, his ankles snapped together, and the metal click echoed through the circular office. Then the last final movement happened, as Snape's feet and hands were attracted to each other. His feet actually left the floor as the restraints left him in a hog-tied position mid-air. A second later, Snape landed on his ass with a yelp of pain.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Release me at once!"

"Silencio!" Ahhh, nice and quiet. Just the way Harry liked it. At least, the way Harry liked it when Snape was in the room. Harry enjoyed the momentary peace, until an indistinct sound interrupted his thoughts. It was Dumbledore clearing his throat. Harry had almost forgotten about him.

"Sorry sir, but he attacked me. I just defended myself." Harry walked over to Snape now, and bent down over him, pushing more buttons on his watch. He also pushed up the sleeves of Snape's robe, not caring about the venomous looks Snape was directing his way.

"I was here Harry, and while I don't support unauthorized dueling against the staff, I agree that you handled yourself admirably. If Severus ever had a chance to convince me you were at fault for your attitude in class earlier today, he has just lost it. I'll speak with him later about this of course....Er, Harry? What are you doing?"

"Sorry, sir. This new watch I got, besides having a built in shield charm, which you've seen works, also has a built in dark arts detector. It can work any number of ways, but I decided to set it to detect a certain dark art spell. I'm using the Dark Mark on Snape's arm to set the detector. Hopefully, this way whenever I'm in the presence of a Death Eater, I'll have some forewarning."

"Interesting. I'd never heard of a dark arts detector working like that, but I'm interested to see if it would work. I'm certain you won't encounter any Death Eaters while at school, but in the presence of Professor Snape at least, the alarm should go off. Please keep me informed."

Harry nodded, and worked his way back to his chair. He momentarily thought about kicking Snape as he passed by, but held back the temptation. Instead Harry just stepped over him, as if he wasn't there.

"Now Harry," Dumbledore picked up where he left off, "we still need to discuss your schooling. Potions is a subject you can't drop out of, and you already have the bare minimum of subjects as it is. I was most disappointed to learn that you only elected to take five classes. But now that I've seen your, eh, extracurricular studies, I'm confident you won't whittle away the time. Do you have any suggestions about continuing potions though?"

It was awkward talking civilly with the Headmaster, while Snape was still screaming in silent protest on the floor behind him, but Harry was able to address the problem. He took a few minutes to think of a solution, but finally gave up.

"I can't think of a thing, Headmaster. It's obvious I can't be in class with Snape, and as you said, he's the only professor qualifies to teach NEWT level potions. Not that he teaches us much." Yeah, Ron had said something similar like that earlier in the week. What was it exactly? Oh yeah.

"You know, Professor. I was just reminded of something Ron said at breakfast a few days ago. He said he was glad he was in remedial potions, as now he finally had a chance to learn something. He figured Snape really hasn't taught us much in the last five years. Only by reading our texts, and by being bothered by Hermione, have we learned the material at all. I was wondering, if there's no one else to teach me Potions, can I just do it myself? I was already doing some advanced reading myself this summer. It wouldn't be hard to continue like that. After all, all Snape does in class anyways is write the recipe on the board, and then make us figure out everything ourselves anyways. I think I could manage on my own."

Dumbledore paused to think about it. Individual study wasn't unheard of, but it was rare. Usually it only happened when a student requested to study a subject that wasn't currently on the curriculum.

Rodger Davies had been the last student, a Ravenclaw boy who had wanted to study magical law. Still, if there were a safeguard in place....

"I think that would be a fine idea Harry, as long as we made sure you were keeping up with your class. Perhaps you could meet with Professor McGonagall once a month to show your competency. Or another professor perhaps, who could borrow Professor Snape's lesson plans for the day."

"How about this professor?" Harry suggested. "I can just compare notes with Hermione every so often. She can even evaluate my work every once in awhile. I'm sure even Snape would agree, were he able to talk, that she's one of the best Potion students of our year. And there's no way she would lie for me about schoolwork. She won't even let me or Ron copy notes from class. I'm sure she'd be willing."

Dumbledore was smiling. "Yes, Ms. Granger is a fine student, and I think that plan will do nicely. I still want to reserve the right to call you to my office though, to test your skills myself should I see the need. I'll also have a few discussions with Ms. Granger, to keep you on your toes, so to speak. Think of it as a pop quiz, if you need. Yes, I think this will work out nicely indeed. Now we only need to arrange you some lab time. There's only the one NEWT potions laboratory, and we'll have to work around Professor Snape's schedule."

"Professor..." Harry interrupted. "If it's OK, I have my own place to brew potions. I bought a full cauldron set this summer, along with a NEWT level potions kit, extra ingredients, scales and measuring spoons, and everything else I need. I won't have to bother Snape this way."

Clearly, Dumbledore was surprised. He still didn't know about the extent of Harry's Diagon Alley purchases, and it was beginning to dawn on him how much he still didn't know. The pieces he thought were fitting together, concerning the whereabouts of Harry during the summer, were once again falling apart.

"It seems," Dumbledore said, "that you purchased more in Diagon Alley than the texts you indicated in your letter. I wonder, what else did you buy?"

Harry smiled. "Now much more. Only more books, this new watch, a ring, a pensieve, a new trunk, some robes, more clothes, and a few other things I'm not ready to tell you about yet. I wanted to be prepared after all. If not for life, then at least for Snape's class. I planned to brew my homework ahead of time, so he couldn't mess with my formulas."

"Harry," Dumbledore admonished, "while I accept the fact that Severus had been hard on you this year, and possibly last year as well, you can't expect me to believe that he actively tries to ruin your potions. He's the teacher in the subject, after all. It's his job to correct your mistakes, not encourage them."

Harry was starting to get mad again. Did Dumbledore really believe Snape was incapable of purposely ruining a student's potion just to embarrass them. If he did, then he didn't know his staff well.

"If you don't believe me, take another look Professor. I've got a special part of my mind dedicated to how unfair Snape's always been to me."

This time Dumbledore wasn't as eager to enter Harry's mind, but he did anyway. Much more time passed than before, but that's because Harry had more memories to share. In fact, there was hardly a single class he took that didn't have something to show Dumbledore. And he didn't just bring up memories about him, either. He also brought up all the memories of Snape making fun of Neville because he melted a cauldron, or when he took points from Hermione for giving too thorough of an answer. Even the times Snape showed favoritism to Draco, while ignoring all the Gryffindors in his class, Harry had the good sense to recall. When he was finished, the Headmaster was looking just as upset as he had earlier.

"Really Severus, was all that necessary." He was looking right at Snape now, who was shooting death glares back at Harry. "I know it's required that you show some favoritism to the children of those who keep council with Voldemort, but that doesn't excuse your horrific behavior.

“Harry.” Dumbledore had turned his attention back now. “I’ll make sure to discuss this further with Professor Snape so it doesn’t happen again. And while your detention with Mr. Filch still stands for next week, I’m willing to replace the hundred points you lost to Gryffindor for the times professor Snape took them away from you and the others undeservingly. If you wish to let Mr. Longbottom and Ms. Granger know, that is fine, but please keep that to the extent of your conversation. All else that took place here today is to remain confidential. I trust you with that fact. Please don’t disappoint me.”

“I won’t sir. Is there anything else?”

“No Harry, I don’t believe so.” Dumbledore made an over exaggerated gesture to look at Professor Snape on the ground. “I think once you release our potions master from his bonds, you’re free to leave.”

Harry got up and stood. “Thank you, sir. I guess I’ll see you at the press conference tomorrow,”

As he walked towards Snape, Dumbledore didn’t agree with or deny Harry’s statement. He remained silent, as he hadn’t yet decided if he should attend tomorrow’s activities.

Harry canceled the muting spell, and then stepped towards the door. As he made to open it, Dumbledore called back his attention. Snape had the good sense not to say anything.

“Ah, Harry? Perhaps you could release Professor Snape from the manacles as well?”

“Sorry Professor.” Harry answered with a grin. “But I just learned that spell. Undoing it is next on my list though, I promise. Goodbye.” As he climbed down the stairs, Harry could have sworn he heard one professor curse and swear, and the other laugh quite happily. Wonder which one was laughing?

*****END FLASHBACK*****

Both Harry's spent more time than normal in the trunk that night. One didn't have a choice, and the other was avoiding the rumors spread around the school. Both got in a great workout, and just for old time's sake, they each used the same restraint spell on each other when they got the chance. And yes, they knew how to counter it as well.

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## Saturday and Sunday

The weekend passed quicker than any other two days did, possibly because Harry slept in late on both days, and played a lot of games with Dobby and Winky as well. He did his training and everything, sure, but with the other Harry busy with the press conference, and then handling his friend's reaction to the newspaper article, the Harry in the trunk had to pass time by himself. Plus not having Wormtail to take care of anymore was another blessing. He didn't miss clearing the rat's waste in the slightest.

In the end, to find out what Wormtail really knew, Harry resorted to using the standard truth serum he had on stock. He told Wormtail it was Veritaserum though, and it seemed to work.

Luckily, Wormtail hadn't broken free of the stunner at Hermione's house until after the Dementor attack was over. He had seen some non-descriptive ghosts or spirits, but never had the chance for a closer look. And as for where he had been, the only thing Wormtail had seen, either in the trunk or at Harry's Hideaway, was the inside of a stone cell. More concisely put, Wormtail posed no risk. Harry thought briefly about Obliviating him, but in the end decided not to chance it. He still needed his memories in tact to prove Sirius's innocence, and Harry didn't want to mess that up.

Just for good measure though, Harry reminded Wormtail of the wizard's debt he still owed, and promised to make his life even more miserable if he revealed any secrets about Harry. After the painful transfer by house-elf he had suffered, not to mention being conscious as his hand was melted off, then haphazardly cauterized, Wormtail every reason to obey anything Harry asked of him, and he did.

Hopefully he'd be kept in Ministry custody, where the one person he was more afraid of, Voldemort, would be unable to get to him.

A few meals later, and after some more showers, workouts, soaks in the tub, and new learned spells, Sunday night approached.

He had just put a steak and kidney pie in the oven, and found his other self in the trunk with him. He had just finished a game of chess with Dobby, and had some free time.

"Got time for some dueling before you leave?" He asked the other.

"You tell me." Was the answer. "You've been through this before, you should know."

Harry smirked. It felt good to turn the tables around this time. "Well in that case, you do have time. And if I'm not mistaken, you're in for an ass kicking too."

Pretty soon things had gone down just the way they had a week ago, except this time, the other Harry grabbed the time tuner from the hollowed out edition of "Hogwarts: A History." He winked out of existence, wearing his cords and comfortable tee, and left one single Harry alone. Sometimes it was nice to be the only one.

Climbing out of his trunk for the first time in almost a week, after taking a shower himself, Harry was asked about missing dinner by Ron and Dean. He just shrugged. It was allowed on the weekends, and besides. Harry had undoubtedly eaten better than the others had.

The next hours, before curfew, Harry spent in the common room, in the company of others. A week of near solitude made him appreciate friends all the more. He had his patrol later that night with Cami, and looked forward to seeing how that went as well. He and Ron wasted the time playing chess, and Harry was just beaten in time to put on some robes, his badge, and scrabble to the Great hall in time to meet Cami.

The patrol was uneventful, but more tiring than the one Tuesday night with Ginny. Because he couldn't use the Marauder's Map, Harry had

to cover a lot more ground. Next week, he'd have to remember to take a nap Sunday afternoon. All the workouts and late night reading really took their toll on him. As they patrolled, he and Cami got to know each other better. Sure enough he had to pull her out of a trick step, and he even got the chance to tease her when he claimed to discover seeing a giant acromantula in a boy's lav. He said he was going to "slay the beast," and she believed him for all of the five seconds before he burst out laughing.

After a very long day, and an even longer week, Harry finally got to bed around one in the morning. He'd have to attend classes for the first time in a week tomorrow morning, and he drifted off to sleep, reminding himself to pick up his DADA homework from the trunk's library.

He awoke two hours later from a searing hot pain in his forehead. Voldemort wasn't happy.

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AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, there it is, the second half of my original chapter. Hopefully now that you've seen the length, you can appreciate it being split up. Also, I know for the most part this chapter is boring (the endless training descriptions, yada yada yada), but I felt it necessary to show everyone what Harry's doing with all the extra time. Plus, the cool scene with Dumble and Snape should make the chapter good enough for you to read. I had a lot of fun writing that scene. That's about it really. Next chapter shouldn't be too long, as long as I don't find more authors plagiarizing my stuff. J/K. I'd also like to take the time to thank Joe Buck, who's gone back and proofread my first six chapters so far. I'm in the process of updating them, and will get all the spelling mistakes like "Occulmency" and "Thestreals" under control. Keep up the good work Joe Buck! Later y'all.

Blk Phoenix – Hey Rob, thanks for the correction about the Hogsmeade trip. It's not changed yet, but I will update it in the future. Yes I agree, that Dumble will know about the passages that Filch knows about too, but those won't come into play in my story. There

might be another passage in the future, but you'll just have to wait and see.

Samyjoc, BigDaddy 753, & Stevie – Thanks for reporting the plagiarism by the other authors. The problems have all been taken care of now, and most of the stuff removed. I don't mind people using ideas (if given credit) or borrowing stuff, god knows I have, but I don't like the cut and paste jobs these authors had done. So thanks for letting me know.

Molly Morrison – You're not the only one to notice the improved relationship between Harry and Dumble. Let me explain. Both are avoiding the subject of Harry's disappearance, and are talking about other, random things. It's a bit like not mentioning the huge honking elephant in the room, if you've heard that expression before. Both characters are aware about the other's unease, so they ignore the most important topics of conversation, and instead talk about meaningless dribble. They aren't best friends or anything like that, they're just pretending for the moment that everything is OK. Obviously it's not, and we'll see more squabble later.

Xenocide – I didn't really work out the math behind phoenix populations, so thanks for the warning. I'll work out the numbers later to change everything, but at least you get the gist of what I meant. I haven't done real math since 10th grade (I placed out of AP Calc 2), so it's been awhile for me. Time to pick up the old TI-82.

Stellaluna Melonballer – I'm sorry that you don't like my version of Harry, but honestly, I don't see how he's that different from normal Harry, with the exception of being more aggressive. Tell me what you don't like about him (name examples), and tell me what you'd like to see, so I can either work with the character, or see the logic behind your decision. Describing him as "insufferable" and "going to die a virgin" are kinda harsh, so I'd like to see what brought you to those conclusions.

Linky2 – Not that I don't enjoy even the smallest reviews or anything, but yours don't make sense, and I'd appreciate it if you either stop making them, or say a little more. Just reviewing to say "Chapter 11"

or “Just read Chapter 14” is a little annoying. Next time, please leave a real review.

Elven-Warrior-Princess – Sorry to disappoint you, but Nick Flamel really did die over 700 years old. I got his birth date off of the HP Lexicon. But no matter how old he really is, the point I was trying to make is that he’s old. Real damn old!

Templar1112002 – I know about Occlumency, but I haven’t the time to go back through all 14 chapters to fix, so I’m not right now. It’s on my list to do though. And don’t worry about Hermione, she’ll not mother Harry much longer. I only thought it proper of her to do with the tour and such. That seems to be right up her alley. She’ll relax soon, don’t worry.

Cubs9911 – Sorry you don’t like my portrayal of Ron, but I said from the start that I don’t like him. And while I won’t change his character from cannon, he’ll have more prat-like moments than best-mate moments. Think of Ron as a see-saw. He’ll have his ups and his downs in my story, just more down than up. Sorry if that bothers you, but I can’t bash on Malfoy too much. I need someone else to pick on, and my muse pointed me towards Ron Weasley.

Grey Mirror of Erisèd – You say that at the end of OoTP, Sirius was cleared of all charges. When was this? If you can provide a page number or some proof, I’d be surprised. Who cleared him? So for now, unless you can prove otherwise, I’ll be continuing my fic as if he was still an escaped convict at the end of Book 5.

Aconite Snape – Good catch on Lorne. I’m a big fan too, but I only got the idea for the name from the show. I never meant to copy it directly. I actually had a friend in HS named Loryn (girl), and I always liked the unique spelling of her name. She was a Mormon though. Weird.

Lucius-Is-Luscious – Thanks for your enthusiastic reviews. I’m glad I converted you from the dark side (aka Lady Ur____). I hope you’re enjoying the story, and that you continue reading. Thanks again.



I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving almost 100 reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit. A link to the site is on my bio page.

Chapter 16 – Promises Kept

“Hey mate, you look better this morning!”

“Thanks Ron. I finally got some sleep last night.” Harry replied. He had just sat down to breakfast on Tuesday morning, after trudging through all his classes the day before. The vision he had from Voldemort Sunday night had woken him much too early, and he had never gotten the chance to fall back asleep. In fact, his scar had prickled with pain even hours after his vision ended.

“What are you two talking about?” Hermione asked. Only Ron so far knew about the vision, owing to the fact that they shared a dorm room. After so many years of living together, it was hard to hide something like that.

“Harry had a dream Sunday night. You know, one of those really bad dreams of his.” Ron couldn’t be more obvious unless he held up his hands to make quotation marks in the air. Luckily that was a muggle thing to do, and Ron didn’t know about it.

“Harry!” Hermione whispered fiercely. “You should have told me. Does Dumbledore know about it? What happened?”

Not wanting to start an argument first thing in the morning on his first day back awake, he looked around carefully for prying ears, and motioned his two friends in closer. Neville and Ginny were sitting a ways down the table, otherwise they would have been included in the conversation themselves. Both them, and Luna as well had been brought up to speed on a lot of things that had happened last year. Harry only felt it right as they had risked their lives going to the Ministry with him. They deserved to know; at least as much as Ron and Hermione already knew.

“It was nothing important Hermione. Voldemort was just pissed about the Quibbler article is all. He didn’t know about Wormtail being captured, and blamed his men for not informing him. He cursed Bellatrix Lestrange until she lost consciousness, and got Malfoy and Nott pretty well too. I also think he’s pissed about me humiliating Fudge. With him in office, Voldemort’s job is easy, because the

Ministry isn't taking proper steps to combat him. Now that Fudge seems on his way out of office, that could all change with a competent Minister. Do you know Fudge is even refusing to train more aurors? Tonks told me last week when I bumped into her on prefect patrol. He'd rather spend the Ministry's money on fund raisers and hosting dinner parties with his pureblood chums like Malfoy, then to bulk up the aurors' numbers for what we know is coming. I only hope that article really will do some good to get Fudge out of office."

Ginny and Neville had joined them the last few moments, and Ginny put in her two cents, holding up a letter she got in the morning post.

"It may take longer than you'd like, Harry. I just got a letter from Mum and Dad, and they found out yesterday that Percy got dismissed from Fudge's office." Harry had told them about running into Percy after his speech, so the subject wasn't taboo anymore. "It seems like he's trying to blame his staff for the 'false information' that was provided to him. He really is a snake! Anyway, Percy got transferred to the Centaur Liaison Office, and Dad found out at work. They talked, and Percy seems really crushed about it. He thought that sticking with Fudge this whole time would be good for his career. Now he's in a dead end job, and doesn't know what to do."

"What's so bad about the Centaur Liaison Office?" Harry asked.

"Really Harry, even I know that." Hermione answered. "That's the worst department in the Ministry of Magic. Centaurs don't want any contact with wizards, so the job is mostly shuffling paperwork, and vain attempts at meeting with the herds. But since centaurs are still classified by the Ministry as magical beasts, instead of magical beings, they want nothing to do with wizards. The Liaison Office is the last place people get sent before being dismissed from the Ministry completely."

"Oh!" Harry didn't know what else to say. It made sense now that he thought about it. Merlin knows that his last encounter with centaurs hadn't gone that well. He had almost been trampled to death. He'd have to apologize to Bane and Magorian if he ever got the chance.

"Who's your letter from Harry? I thought your relatives didn't write you?" Neville had noticed the parchment envelope in Harry hands. The fact that it was a light pink color didn't help any.

"Ahhh, it's just from a friend. I haven't read it yet. Come on, we'll be late for Transfiguration." Before the others could argue they still had twenty minutes left before class, Harry got up and left the Great hall, stuffing the letter in his bag.

He really hadn't read it yet, but he knew who it was from. Amber, the young clerk who he'd had a lunch date with. As promised, Harry had written her about his first week in school, and the school owl had just brought back her reply that morning. He almost used Hedwig without thinking, but came to his senses at the last moment. It wouldn't do well for a young, defenseless girl to be seen accepting letters from a very recognizable phoenix. He didn't want to risk Amber's safety. So he had sent a trustworthy school owl instead, once he convinced Hedwig he had no other choice. That took some time.

Not knowing what to say, Harry's first attempt at a letter had sounded more like a book report; summarizing his first week of lessons. After he burnt the piece of parchment, he tried again. The second attempt was much better, and only glanced over his classes. Most of the letter let her know how much fun he had during their date. Harry didn't know if it was due to spending time with her, or just simply being out of the house after so many weeks cooped up, but he didn't tell her that. Harry also made a joke about him being thick, and only realizing what her last comment to him about "not all relationships have to be serious" had meant hours after she said it. It took a lot of Gryffindor courage for him to write that last line, but he had managed. He never could have in person, but in a letter was easier.

Arriving early in class, and ripping into the letter before the others arrived, he was relieved to see that Amber didn't mind his bold move. The letter was very flirtatious, and was dripping with enough sexual innuendo to rival a contraceptive sponge. She had little to say about his classes, but did enjoy the story of him cursing Snape in front of the whole class. She told a similar story that had happened at her school in America, but it wasn't nearly as drastic. The rest of the letter was more personal. Amber told him how much fun she had had at

lunch, and how he wasn't at all like she thought Harry Potter would be. If Harry was able to visit her again, she promised, he'd be able to find out more about her as well; preferably a meeting at night. No loss on the hidden message there.

She certainly wasn't a girl to take home to mother, that was for sure. But Harry didn't exactly have a mother to take her home to. Besides, regardless of how things developed, Harry just liked the fact that he had someone to write to while at school. He looked forward to morning much more now that he might be receiving the next steamy letter from her.

Transfiguration passed quickly enough, with Hermione and Harry still being the top students in the class. Hermione must have really studied over the weekend, because Harry noted he didn't even come close to beating her in class exercises. He still managed to finish second; but there was a clear leader in the pack.

Arithmancy in the afternoon was the same, but Harry made sure to pay attention to Ginny this time as he left class. They had to patrol later that night, and agreed to meet early again in the common room. Climbing the final staircase to the Gryffindor common room, they nearly collided with Professor McGonagall.

"Ah, Mr. Potter and Ms. Weasley." She said. "Just the two students I was looking for. We have some things to discuss, so please meet me in my office after dinner tonight. That is all."

Ron, Hermione, and Neville had just come back from their lessons, and had heard McGonagall speak.

"What's that about?" Ron asked. "You haven't been caught doing anything against school rules yet, have you? It's only that second week of classes!"

"Hermione?" Harry joked. The two had been spending more time around each other, and it was a private running joke between the close friends. Harry got a hit on his arm for his attempt at humor.

"Ouch!" Harry rubbed his arm. Ron had really gotten him good. "I don't know what she wants. Maybe it has something to do with our prefect patrol?"

Ginny agreed. "I can't imagine what else it could be. Just the two of us don't have anything else in common besides Arithmancy, and that doesn't concern her. We'll just have to wait until later to find out."

Soon after dinner, they did find out. What Harry and Ginny had in common, according to McGonagall, was the opportunity to become the Gryffindor Quidditch captain. They were the only two surviving members of the year's previous team who were eligible. Because of his unsatisfactory grades last term, it was decided by McGonagall that Ron wasn't suitable.

Harry might have liked to be the captain years earlier, but with all his extra training, advanced classes, the D.A. to worry about, and prefect duties, he already felt like he had enough on his plate. Ginny felt the same way. She didn't even have a guaranteed place on the team yet, and because she had to sit for her OWLs that year, she was nervous about accepting the position. Plus there was the fact that she had never even considered it.

"Are you sure Ron can't be the captain?" Harry asked. "He'd love the job, and I'm sure he'd take his studies more seriously if it was explained to him. He's wanted this ever since I've known him."

"I'm sorry Mr. Potter." McGonagall replied. "While I do agree that Mr. Weasley would make an excellent captain, I have no doubt that his studies would suffer from it. Angelina last year was a prefect, and even Wood had top marks in his class. So far this year, Mr. Weasley has continued to do only the amount of work that requires a passing grade. I don't want to have a captain fall apart on me next year, when the NEWTs approach. So that's why I can't offer him the position. You two say you have a lot on your plates already, but you're still two of my top students. According to the other professors, it's the same in their classes as well. Mr. Weasley just doesn't have the marks."

Neither really wanted the job, as they were both afraid of upsetting Ron. This last bit of news might push him over the edge. Harry

actually argued all the reasons he thought Ginny should get the job, but she rebutted all his arguments with her own. She was feisty when she wanted to be.

In the end, McGonagall made the decision for them. If neither wanted the honor of being the Gryffindor Quidditch team captain individually, then they would have to share the responsibility. Seeing as how they were the only two members on the team allowed the position, they didn't have much of a choice. Without another word, Professor McGonagall dismissed them from her office.

"Ron's going to never talk to me again, once he finds out." Harry wined. Neither had any homework to do, and had to kill some time until their prefect patrol. Not wanting to run into Ron, who would demand to know what the meeting was about, Ginny suggested they go someplace and talk about holding tryouts.

"Good idea Gin. Follow me." Harry knew a perfect spot.

He led her away from the transfiguration corridor, and towards the familiar tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. It was close to the Gryffindor common room, so they were heading in that direction anyways. After walking past the tapestry three times, a door opened in the hall, known to access the Room of Requirements.

"Whoa, this room sure has changed since I last saw it." Ginny commented. The room which housed D.A. meetings last year was now much larger, as well as more equipped. There were actual desks and chairs against the walls, instead of just cushions and pillows. There were more books as well, along with a teacher's desk, four dueling platforms, and some practice dummies which Harry knew well.

Harry had spent the last two days setting the room up, with some help from Remus. He had gotten back late Sunday night from whatever mission he had been on, and had met with Harry early Monday morning. The two had collected the D.A. sign up sheets, and gone over how Harry wanted to run the meetings.

"Yeah, well, we got more students this year." Harry answered. "The advanced class has twenty six returning students, and the beginners

have almost eighty. I'm hoping to move some ahead into the advanced class within the first month."

"You already have the meeting days set, then?" Ginny asked.

"Yep. The advanced class will meet every Wednesday the hour before dinner, starting tomorrow. Same time on Thursdays for the novices. Then Remus will hold an open three hour session Sunday afternoons for anyone who wants extra practice. I won't be able to attend most of those meetings, but it's really just a practice session anyways. Remus won't be teaching new spells; only overseeing the practice of ones I've taught. He'll also be able to privately tutor any students who want the help. He's making four half hour session available each day, during lesson times. That way if a student has a free period, and wants to do some work, he or she can sign up with Remus."

"If we're supposed to start meeting tomorrow, why don't I know yet?" Ginny asked. Currently, she was walking around the room, inspecting all the new gear.

"Oh, Hermione started to put the fliers up right after dinner. We just haven't been to the common rooms yet. Since we don't need to meet in secret anymore, we don't have to use the coins from last year. She's letting everybody keep them though, kind of as a memento. I'm thinking about having mine framed, along with a copy of the Quibbler article from last year." Harry joked. Those articles had been hot contraband last year, and very few of the original ones survived.

Once Ginny came back from inspecting the table of Dark Art detectors, Harry asked the room to provide him with a chalkboard, and he began to list the positions they needed to fill on the team. He made Ginny blush when he assured her she was as good as a chaser already. They just needed the formalities of tryouts so no one could say he played favorites. With Ginny in that position, there were two other chasers that they needed, along with two beaters as well. Harry also insisted on auditioning a back up seeker, in case something happened to him. He wasn't looking forward to getting hurt, but every year so far he had missed at least one game. Ginny made a great seeker as well, but they couldn't afford to lose her as chaser.

"Besides," Harry assured her, "I've only got two more years anyways. I better start training my replacement. We should pick someone still young, but with potential."

The next hours flew by, as Ginny and Harry talked nothing but Quidditch. Unlike the previous Tuesday night, this time Harry enjoyed their talk. Ginny knew almost as much about the game as her brothers did, and had some great ideas about strategies and tactics. She also explained the essentials about the chaser and beater positions to Harry, who had never paid much attention before. Even in backyard pick up games at the Burrow, he had always played seeker.

Ginny also made sure to list the other team's players, and wanted to find out their weaknesses. Both Ravenclaw and Slytherin needed at least two chasers each, and both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff needed new keepers as well. Only in the position of seeker were there no new players. Harry had his work cut out for him this year.

Before they knew it, it was time to meet the earlier patrol in the Great Hall, and the two made their way down the stairs. Harry didn't have time to collect the Marauder's Map this time around, so the two had to patrol the old fashioned way. Hours later, they both tucked into bed after an exhausting day, and fell asleep.

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With no more Potions class on Wednesday, Harry had a lot of time to get ready for the DA meeting that night. He had already decided that it would primarily be a review session, but he also planned to show the class a few of the things that they'd be learning during the current school term. The advanced class took a lot of planning, while the novice one was basically a repeat of what he had taught the previous year.

And so at 4:30 that afternoon, a half hour after classes ended, Harry made sure he was ready waiting with the door to the Room of Requirements open. At five he welcomed in all the members, and

was disappointed to see two not show. Once he figured out who the two were, it made more sense.

After everyone filed in the room, with Remus already seated inside, Harry went to close the door, only to have it held open by a foot at the last moment. When Harry turned around to see who held it open, a sour look crossed over his face.

"What do you want, Draco?"

The blonde boy sneered at being called his first name, but kept his calm. "Why we're here for advanced defense training, of course. That is, if you prove to actually know what you're doing." Malfoy jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the group of Slytherins in tow. Besides the usual Crabbe and Goyle, Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, and Theodore Nott were also in attendance.

"Sorry Draco, but this is the advanced group. No new members until you prove yourself in the novice class. If you bothered to read the sign up sheets, which I know you didn't because none of your names on them, then you would know that. Better luck next time." Harry really was enjoying refusing the students point blank to their faces.

"I don't care about stupid sign up sheets or novice groups, Potter. I'm a Malfoy, and I'm sure you'll be hearing plenty from my father and the School Board of Governors if you don't let us in. We have as much of a right to join this group as anyone."

"Sod off, Malfoy!" Ron yelled from somewhere in the back. Harry heard Hermione and Remus shushing him, but didn't turn his head any. Instead he continued the staring contest with Malfoy, adamant about not being the first one to give in.

"Like I said, Draco. This is for the advanced group only. I don't care what you think your father can do. Personally, I'd love to see him in person again. I have a special present in mind, next time I run into him. So scurry back down to your dungeons, and cry to your daddies all you want. I could care less." As Draco's sneer faded ever so slightly, Harry kicked his foot out of the way, and shut the door. He

could hear banging and spells on the opposite side, but the door remained shut.

"I don't understand, why can't they get in?" Hannah Abbot asked.

"That the first new thing you need to know about the D.A. this year." Harry explained. "The door has been charmed to only allow professors and the club president. Filch was worried about this room becoming another Astronomy tower, and he demanded that something be done now that so many people will know of it's location. So from now on, make sure to arrive no later than five minutes after meeting times. After that, I'll shut the doors and you won't be able to get in."

"But what if we want to use the room for practice by ourselves? How will we get in?" Someone else asked.

"That's the point, you won't be able to." Harry thought that was clear. "There are plenty of empty classroom you can use if you really want, or you could go outside. Bu the school staff is worried about the room being used for other purposes, if you know what I mean. So unfortunately, they have to keep it locked. But Rem..., I mean Professor Lupin will be available for four half hour shifts everyday. There's a sign up sheet on his office door, which is just down the hall from here. Just remember that he isn't a full time professor this year, and won't always be around the castle. Please don't monopolize his time with questions or comments that should be asked the DADA teacher instead. I know he wouldn't mind spending time with everyone, but I'm hoping he'll be able to fill all four of his extra session each day." Lupin nodded from the back of the room. Harry had guessed correctly. If it was up to him, Lupin would tutor the students in any subject they asked of him, as long as he got to teach. If thing went the way that Harry wanted, hopefully he wouldn't have that time.

"Secondly, I want to make everyone aware that this group is to be known as the Defense Association." Harry continued. A few gave quizzical looks around the room, but nobody spoke u about the group's other nickname. "I know there were some jokes last year, but Professor Dumbledore got fired over a simple piece of parchment that

had 'Dumbledore's Army' on it. Besides, I for one am not fighting for Dumbledore. I'm fighting for myself. I plan to teach you all how to defend yourself if needed, not to follow someone else blindly into battle. If you have any other notions as to what this group was set up to do, you can always leave."

No one said a word. The animosity Harry had towards Dumbledore was subtle, but picked up by his immediate friends. Just that fact that Harry said so was good enough for everyone else.

The first half of the meeting was review, and Harry noted that a lot of the students were rusty. None except his close group of friends had any practice over the summer, and it was very apparent. So Harry split up with Luna to go around the group correcting their stances and incantations, while Hermione and Neville, and Ron and Ginny did the same thing. Terry Boot and Susan Bones did the best out of the group besides the six friends, but none were too horrible.

Harry quickly went through the disarming spell, the stunning spell, summoning charms, shield charms, and all the other basics they had touched on last year. After the first half hour was over, the group all practiced the Patronus Charm. Harry managed his bright silver stag with ease, but only he and Remus knew it was a disappointment. Harry had still not managed to repeat the golden stag that had killed the Dementors at Hermione's house.

Hermione also managed to summon her otter, as did Ginny with a barely formed bird. It wasn't clear yet, but it definitely took flight. Luna, Ron and Neville all had strong wisps of silver vapors coming from their wands, as did a few others. Harry was impressed, considering none had practiced the spell since the last meeting. That was over four months ago.

The first DA meeting officially ended with a mock duel, between Harry and Remus. They had planned the short five minute fight earlier in the day, and they made sure to use some of the advanced spells Harry had in mind to teach the group later in the year. Remus had had no input with the spell list Harry put together, and he himself didn't even know all of them. Most came from the books that Harry had purchased.

The duel opened with all the familiar sights, but soon incorporated some more difficult spellwork. Harry mostly played defense in the duel, while Remus took the offense. He used some mild pain curses (nothing too serious), distraction spells, and a variety of charms. Harry demonstrated an advanced shield, some artful dodging, the rebound charm he had used in Dumbledore's office, and a small selection of the wand binding spells he had discovered. Those really impressed the group, including Remus, and even Hermione was shocked that Harry had managed to find such a useful defensive spell. None of them had ever heard of such spells, and couldn't wait to try them out.

It was one of those wand binding spells that Harry used to end the duel. Remus had cast a pain curse at him that would give him a pounding headache, and Harry had time to block it. While Remus was busy dodging his owl spell rebounding from Harry's shield, Harry chose to bind Remus's wand against casting the stunning and disarming spells, and then he pretended to fall down, hurt. Remus, taking advantage of his "injured" opponent, went to stun Harry, only to find himself unable to do so. He then tried to disarm Harry, with similar results. He knew what would happen of course, but none of the others did. They all thought Remus was making fun of Harry's weakened position, until Harry sat up with a smile on his face, and cast Expelliarmus at Remus. The werewolf got thrown clear across the room, and safely landed in a pile of cushions, as his wand flew to Harry's hand.

With a quick explanation of what the spells used in the duel were, as well as a tentative order in which they'd be learning them, the group exited the room in excited conversation.

"Harry, that was brilliant. I don't know where you found some of those spells, but you've really put a lot of work into this. Well done!" Hermione was positively glowing, and it looked like Ron had noticed as well. He couldn't keep his eyes off of his other best friend, but unfortunately she was only looking through the conjured books on the shelves.

"Can I borrow some of these, Harry?" She wanted to know.

"You can't." Ginny answered. "They disappear as soon as they leave the room. You can't take anything out of the Room of Requirements."

"How do you know?" Ron demanded.

"I found out last year." Ginny simply shrugged. "I thought it would be a good idea to put a foe glass up in the common room, but it didn't work. I tried to take other stuff as well, but that didn't work either. I just figure that nothing will leave the room."

"Well, you're right Ginny. If we were able to take anything out of this room, there would never be a need to go shopping again." Remus had finished stretching from his flight across the room, and came over to where the small group was sitting on the floor. "Imagine; you'd be able to find everything from the rarest potion ingredients, to the most expensive dress robes if there weren't limitations on this room. There'd never be a need for Galleons. Anyway, I'm off everyone. See you all at dinner, and don't stay up to late badgering Harry about those new spell. See ya!"

"Goodbye, Professor Lupin." Neville said. Luna joined him, but the others still called him Remus or Moony when they were the only ones around.

The next night's meeting was much more chaotic, due to all the new members, and especially at the beginning. True to their threat, Draco and the other Slytherins showed up once again, and caused a lot of the younger students to shy away in fear. Only when Harry had shut them out of the room did they all relax.

Draco had refused to accept the fact that Harry didn't have to allow them in the group, and even went as far as to complain to Remus. Although, calling him "werewolf" didn't earn him any brownie points. Remus quite calmly informed them all that Harry had the full support of the Headmaster, and had complete autonomy as club president who was allowed membership. Besides, as Harry pointed out, none of the students had signed up on the D.A. sheets, which Harry had based his class projections on. Not wanted to further embarrass

himself in front of the other students, Draco huffed off in anger after another minute of protests, and was followed by his clique.

Not all the Slytherins were banned from the meeting though. Of the nearly eighty students in attendance, a full quarter were dressed in green and silver. Most were comprised of the younger years, and the oldest Slytherins were a pair of forth year twins, but it was an impressive turnout nonetheless. It seemed Harry's tour of the first year students had done his reputation some good, because six of the nine firsties showed up, and had spread the word to some of their housemates. The Gryffindor students were mostly younger, as the older ones were already part of the advanced D.A. group. Between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, the numbers were spread evenly among the age groups.

Ron and Hermione had accompanied Harry that night, as they promised to do until he could sort out which students would be moved into the advanced group. Once that happened, he would have a more manageable number for just him and Remus to teach. Cho and Marietta Edgecomb had also showed up, after Harry politely asked them to at breakfast that morning.

The reason they had missed the meeting the night before, was because they were unsure if they would be welcomed back. Harry had already forgiven them both months earlier (due to his time tuner, he'd had a lot of time to think things over), and let them know there were no hard feelings. As an act of good faith, he even gave Marietta the counter curse to Hermione's handiwork from the year before. That morning she was wearing a lot of muggle make up to hide the word "SNEAK" still prominently displayed across her forehead. When she showed up to the D.A. meeting however, the make up was gone, and she had a bright smile on her face.

Due to the first year's lack of knowledge, they mainly watched as Harry instructed the large group on the first two spells. Expelliarmus and Stupefy, while being third year material, were among the most useful spells in defense, and that's where Harry started. Marietta too needed some brush up work, as her memory had been altered the year before by Kingsley Shacklebolt. She was almost starting D.A. lessons from scratch.

Cho joined Harry, Remus, Ron, and Hermione in circulating throughout the room, and towards the end of the hour, she and Harry demonstrated some of the more advanced spells the group would get to learn if they advanced to the next level. Harry was happy to see that Cho was still able to cast her swan patronus, as well as the other advanced work he had the D.A. practice the night before.

This group too left that night in excited conversation, and already the newly reformed D.A. was a hit.

Thursday and Friday were slow days as far as Harry's schedule went, so he decided to take the time to reevaluate his training progress. Not having a class Friday afternoon due to his dismissal from potions, Harry crawled into his trunk, took a blank sheet of parchment from the drawer in his library, and set to work.

His work with his personalized stunning spell was coming along nicely, and he hoped to be finished with it in about a month. Harry still had problems meditating on an animagus form, but he thought that he might just not have the talent for it. Every time he tried to visual his "inner animal" in his mind, a block would appear. He also decided to start using the pensieve he bought, but didn't want to loose access to Rosier's memories while doing so. So Harry conjured up a glass jar with an air-tight lid, and emptied the swirling silvery substance into it. The glass jar wouldn't allow him to access the memories (only a pensieve could do that), but at least Harry could store the memories for future use. He could always put them back later if he wanted to.

His work with the Cruciatus had also improved, once Harry figured out on how to concentrate on one aspect of the pain, instead of trying to ignore it all completely. Harry could now almost regularly fight through the pain enough to fire off one curse, although that took at least a minute. The ultimate goal of course was to be able to throw the curse off completely, but Harry thought that might take years. He'd be happy enough to be able to cast three or four spells with only a moderate pain to worry about.

His new goals, as Harry wrote down on his parchment much the same way he did that summer, were simple. One, he wanted to really get good with potions. Besides having to keep up with Snape's class, and suffer from Hermione's possible pop quizzes, Harry wanted to be able to brew Veritaserum correctly, among other more difficult potions. The batch of the truth serum he had just finished didn't turn out right, although it was close. The final potion had a slight brown tint to its color, and a test by a kind of wizarding litmus paper had ensured Harry that he had made a mistake somewhere in the brewing process.

Secondly, Harry wanted to finalize the design and testing of his personal stunner, and possibly move onto another new spell. Personally, Harry didn't know why more personal spells weren't available to the public, as they were easy enough to create with enough practice. With less than a year's experience in the field, Harry's Arithmancy skills were great enough to create spells. He wondered why there weren't more professional spell inventors at work.

And lastly, Harry wanted to continue working on his arsenal of combative spells. It wasn't enough to just learn the spell once, and make sure he could cast it. Harry had to continually practice until casting them came as second nature. It wouldn't do well for Harry to be in the heat of battle, and only be able to remember a handful of his favorites. He had to make them all easily accessible, so he'd have access to a multitude of spells when the time came.

As the weekend rolled around, Harry swore to himself that he'd take the time off from studying to spend some time with his friends. It was now the end of the second week of school, and Harry had spent so much time with his advanced work and training, he had hardly seen them outside of classes and meals. Seeing as Ron had been bugging him all week long to go flying, Harry agreed to a pick up game of Quidditch Saturday morning.

Ron wanted to practice his keeper skills, as did Ginny as chaser. Harry just wanted to fly, so he decided to give the position of chaser a try as well. None of their other friends wanted to join in, so Harry played a game against Ginny with Ron as the all time keeper. The quick game reminded Harry of a basketball game of one on one.

At first both Weasleys had been surprised when Harry arrived in the common room with a strangely shaped black case, but Hermione recognized it immediately.

"Harry? Since when did you start playing the trombone?"

Both Ron and Ginny were confused as to what a trombone was, so Hermione quickly explained as they all walked down to the Entrance Hall. Hermione had decided to watch the game from the stands, but brought two books along with her as well.

"It's not a trombone." Harry explained. "It's just the case that my new broom came in. It actually works well. The hard case keeps the broom from being damaged, while the soft interior protect the broom's finish. There's also room for a polishing kit, a set of pads, and some other stuff as well."

"I don't get it." Ron exclaimed. "Didn't McGonagall give you back your Firebolt? Why do you need a new broom?"

"And what type is it?" Ginny asked. "I've never heard of a broom packaged in a tom-brone case before."

"I did get my Firebolt back, but I wasn't sure that it was even still around till school started. For all I knew, Umbridge took it with her. And even if it was still available, I promised myself that I wouldn't use it, because it's one of the only things given to me by Sirius. I don't know if I could stand to see it destroyed like my Nimbus was. So I got a new broom this summer to use for Quidditch. And it's a new model, that's why you don't recognize the packaging."

"But there are no new models that are as good as a Firebolt!" Ron voiced his concern. "If you use another broom, we might as well be handing the Quidditch cup over to Slytherin! Harry, you've got to use the Firebolt!"

"Don't worry Ron." Harry sighed. "I've been promised this broom is far better than my Firebolt. From the little I've flown it, I think it will do just fine. And before any of you ask, the reason you haven't heard of this

broom is because it's not even available yet. It doesn't even have a name. This is the prototype, and the maker agreed to let me use it as long as I write him regular letters on its performance. Hopefully, it will be made available sometime next year."

Ginny and Hermione were satisfied with Harry's last outburst, but Ron was still muttering under his breath; something about a perfectly good Firebolt wasting away in a school trunk.

All of Ron's complaints were put to rest though within the first five minutes of them flying. They hadn't started a game yet, they were just warming up, but already Harry was doing tricks and stunts that made his Firebolt look like an old Cleansweep 5.

"Whoa Harry, you were right. We're gonna kick Slytherin's tail this year with you on that! Man, can it fly! Let's start the game."

And so they did, and Harry managed a fairly good job of pretending to be a chaser. Ginny even commented on his skill as Harry managed to get his fourth goal past Ron, but Harry just brushed off the compliment.

"Well, it's in my blood I suppose. My father was a great chaser. Besides, there aren't any Bludgers or anything, so it's not that hard."

Ron got motivated by that last remark, and his game increased dramatically after that. Ginny was however the better chaser of the two, and managed more goals against Ron than Harry did. With a final goal of 130-60, the group called it quits after nearly two hours in the air.

"Harry, mind if I have a go on your new broom?" Ron asked as the group headed for the ground. "If it's really better than a Firebolt, than I gotta try it out."

Harry didn't mind, and the two traded brooms mid-air as only practiced broom fliers could. They heard Hermione shriek in the distance, but only laughed it off. If she saw half of what went on during Quidditch practice, she'd know that this little stunt wasn't much danger.

Ron flew around for a few minutes, and Ginny took some practice shots at him with the Quaffle, most of which he missed. All the shots knocked Ron off course, and he couldn't make it back to the three goals in time to save the next attempts.

"Harry, this is ruddy awful!" Ron told him as the two traded broom again in mid-air. "The damn thing is so light, you can't keep your place in the air. I'd rather play with Bill's old Silver Arrow!"

Harry laughed. "That's because it's a broom made for seekers, Ron. It's made to be light and fast, not sturdy and stable. The new line will have a different broom for every position. Here Ginny, you try it out. Let's see what you think."

Ginny thought it very kind of Harry to give her a try, and went to land only to see Harry still hovering mid-air. She flew back up towards him, and swapped brooms nervously. She had never done it before, but with so many older brothers growing up to play with, she was still very comfortable in the air.

The one little boggle she did have was when Ginny threw her last leg over the broom handle, and got carried too far by her momentum. She almost toppled off the side, and was about to perform a Sloth Grip Roll to avoid falling to the ground below, when Harry reached out from her new Comet 260 to get a grip on her. The broom had been a gift from her parents for making prefect, but right now that was the last thing from the girl's mind. More important was the grip Harry had around her waist, which accidentally was a litter higher than he aimed for.

Realized that his hand was brushing up against the underside of Ginny's breast, Harry quickly drew his had away as soon as he was sure that she wouldn't fall. Both had gone beet red by then, and luckily Ron wasn't paying attention. After all the heat he had been giving Dean these past two weeks, Harry had no doubt that Ron would scream bloody murder if he saw his best friend fondling his baby sister. The circumstances be damned.

“Sorry.” Harry murmured. He didn’t know what else to say, and he couldn’t even look Ginny in the eyes to apologize properly. If he wasn’t so properly embarrassed, he might have found a little humor, and even some pleasure in the experience.

Ginny dismissed it quickly, and flew off before the situation could get any more embarrassing. Harry flew back over to where Ron was talking with Hermione, and from the stands watched as Ginny made spectacular dives and feints on his new broom. Harry could actually hear her screaming with glee as she flew at top speed, attempting daring moves. She had never even flown Harry’s Firebolt, and the best broom Ginny had previously flown was the Nimbus Fred and George had bought the year before.

Once Ginny landed by the stands, the two’s previous altercation was forgotten.

“Harry, that was splendid! I never knew flying could be so much fun! It’s no wonder you enjoy playing seeker so much with a broom like that. I can’t wait for Malfoy to see it. He’ll never know what hit him!”

“Yup, but let’s keep this secret until our first match. I don’t want Slytherin or the other teams to find out about my new broom until they have to. It’ll be a great secret weapon.”

Ginny and Ron both grinned madly, and even Hermione had a smirk on her face. Together the four friends made their way to the equipment shed, to return the Quaffle they had borrowed. Harry unlocked the door with the key McGonagall had given him and Ginny, when Hermione noticed it. She had already been in the stands when they got the ball in the first place.

“Harry? Why do you have the keys to the equipment shed? I thought only Madame Hooch was supposed to have access.”

“Team captains too.” Ron corrected her. “Congratulation then, Harry. I reckon that was what McGonagall met with you the other night about. But what was Ginny there for?”

Harry was surprised that Ron didn't seem upset, but answered Ron's question. Ginny looked on nervously. They had hoped to hold off telling Ron about the news of them being team captains till tryouts started.

"Actually, McGonagall offered both of us the position as captain." Harry explained. "Neither of us wanted it though, because Ginny's got OWLs this year, and I've got the D.A., my independent studies, and Voldemort to worry about. I actually wanted you to be captain Ron, but McGonagall said she wouldn't let you. So instead, she made Ginny and I co-captains. We'll have to split all the work, but it should lesson the workload for the two of us."

"Really? Way to go, Gin! At least one of us got to be a captain this year. Wait until Charlie hears."

Ginny frowned. "You're not mad, Ron? It really should have been you."

"Nah. I expected it to tell you the truth. After I got my OWLs back, and got dismissed from being prefect, I knew that Quidditch captain was a long shot. No worries."

Both Harry and Ginny were greatly relieved, and Ginny even gave her brother a short hug for being so understanding. It may be taking him a little longer than the others his age, but Ron was indeed growing up.

"Speaking of your independent studies, Harry." Hermione informed him. "Professor Dumbledore asked me last night to check up on your potions work. I know it's only been one week since you've been on your own, but I haven't even seen you schedule time to go down to the dungeons yet. You really can't procrastinate this much longer."

Harry smiled. "I haven't been procrastinating Hermione, and I have been brewing potions. I'm just not using Snape's classroom to do it in. I've got my own potions lab."

Hermione looked very suspicious, as did Ginny. Ron might have also, but he had seen Harry enter and exit his trunk daily for two full weeks. He had an idea where the potions lab might be.

"Really Hermione," Harry assured her, "I'll show you tonight. It's in the new trunk I bought this summer. It's got rooms in it like Mad-Eye Moody's trunk. I've got a library, living quarters; everything I need."

Hermione's eyes lit up at mention of a library, and she reminded Harry of his promise to show her his collection of books that he made on the train ride to school.

Ginny and Ron looked equally interested in seeing the inside of his trunk, and Harry promised they'd get the chance. Ron had already been asking for a solid week, but Harry had so far refused. He'd been too busy training as of yet.

"Tell you what." Harry promised. "Let's get washed up for lunch, eat some because I can already hear Ron's stomach growling, and then we'll grab Neville and Luna. I'll go up to the dorm to grab my trunk, and we can all meet at the Room of Requirements to see it."

They all agreed, none worrying about how Harry was going to carry his trunk halfway across school, and happily went inside. They all washed up quickly, and just made it to lunch in time for the first helpings of burgers and chips to appear on the golden platters. Because it was a weekend, house mingling was allowed, and Luna joined the group at the Gryffindor table. She had been treated better by her housemates lately, but still preferred the company of those who liked her, to those who simply tolerated her.

When lunch was over, Harry headed up to Gryffindor tower, while the rest branched off at the corridor that held the Room of Requirements. It only took Harry an extra five minutes to run up to his room, peak his head into his trunk and scream a warning to his double, and then shrink his trunk and run back down the stairs to meet his friends. By now they knew only he could open the door to the room, which he did as soon as he arrived. The room provided was plain and small, but suited their needs just fine.

"Alright everyone," Harry began his spiel as he enlarged his trunk, "this is the trunk that was commission by my grandfather over twenty years ago. He died before it was completed, and the family forgot

about it after that. My father was still in school, and then he joined the Order. The trunk was made to be able to house a family of four; to be able to hide in plain sight. That's why the inside is so nice, and the outside is so secure."

Hermione and Ginny were running their hands over the smooth finish and intricate bronze work, admiring the trunk. Ron and Neville had seen enough of the outside already, and were just impatient to see the rest. Luna for once was focused on the object of discussion, but didn't do more than stare.

"When I went in to buy a new trunk this summer, I was only thinking of getting something bigger for all my new stuff. I didn't know that this even existed. But once I found out who it belonged to, I had to have it."

The others nodded in agreement. As long as one had the means to buy such an expensive item, anyone in Harry's position would have done the same.

Harry proceeded to tell them about some of the security measures, and opened the trunk's first two compartments to show them both the size and some of the new items he had bought. Ginny enjoyed the empty Pensieve, Ron got a thrill out seeing both brooms lined up side by side, and Neville and Luna admired the selection of clothes Harry had. They even made Harry model his black and white phoenix dress robes which the Quibbler article had so much to say about. Hermione paid close attention, but eagerly awaited the books.

So it was her that Harry let enter the third compartment first. The others soon followed, and Harry brought up the rear. By the time he entered and closed the trunk lid behind him, Hermione already had three large tombs open on the study desk in the middle of the room. With all six of them inside, the room was a little cramped, but manageable.

"Oh Harry, these are wonderful!" Hermione gushed over an advanced transfiguration text. "When you said you bought some advanced reading, I had no idea your collection was so extensive. This must have cost a fortune!"

“Only about fifty of these are from a bookstore, Hermione. The rest came from my family vault, which I also stumbled into this summer. I took out all the books I could find, but left all the art, furniture, weapons, and money. Once I turn seventeen, I’ll have full access. There’s also another hundred or so books back at my Hideaway, but those I’ve already read.”

The others were just browsing the shelves, while Ron unhappily sat at the desk, waiting for Hermione to finish. Harry was also eager to move the tour along, as he didn’t want Hermione to discover some of the darker books in his collection. None of them really stood out leaning up against the shelves, but just opening the pages of a few would tell his secret. More than one of the books let loose screams and curses if the reader handled the text improperly. Harry also got nervous about his copy of “Hogwarts: A History,” but was glad to see it gone from his shelves. His double must have hidden it, knowing that Hermione would beeline straight to that title if she saw it.

“Alright, Ron’s getting bored, so we’re moving on. Hermione, I promise you can borrow some books anytime you want.” Harry had no choice to promise her at her disappointed look.

Having already explained the portal, Harry moved the group into the next chamber, which was his potions lab. Upon entering, Harry was surprised to see an illusion covering up Dobby and Winky’s side of the room, but figured his double did it again. The space just appeared to be a blank wall, and no evidence of house-elf dwelling could be found.

Taking the time to show off his full set of potions equipment and stock of ready-made potions, Hermione was more than impressed with Harry’s work to date. The Polyjuice Potion was the most difficult potion on hand, and as they had practice making it already Hermione was only mildly impressed, but Harry assured her he had made other advanced potions as well. His copy of “Rare and Powerful Potions” was nearby, and Harry appeased her thirst for knowledge by showing her the recipe for Wolfsbane. He had guessed that she might like to take a shot at the potion for possible extra credit, and boy was he

right. Her eyes lit up with hunger, but again, the others were getting bored.

"Come on Harry, I thought you said there was cool stuff in here!" Ron whined.

"You want cool, Ron? Here, you can be the first to go through into the next room." Harry was excited to see his friend's reaction to the dueling chamber. At first he had been worried his friend might be jealous of Harry's possession, but so far today Ron had been nothing but supportive.

The others followed Ron into the dueling chamber, and were very impressed with the work out room. Hermione, and strangely Luna recognized, the muggle work out equipment, and Harry was forced to demonstrate how each machine worked. Ron and Neville were jokingly boasting who could lift the most weight, and Ron won after he bench pressed one hundred sixty five pounds. Harry privately thought he might be able to outdo his friend, but didn't want to show off. Hermione gave him a look that said she knew he'd be able to also. After all, it was his equipment, and he must have been using it. While Ron was still much taller than Harry, Ginny wasn't the only one to notice Harry's impressive build. Hermione had gotten a good look during Quidditch that morning, which Harry had only worn a tee shirt and jeans to. While wizard robes did a good job of hiding a person's physique, a tight, thin shirt couldn't do the same job.

Harry also let the guys all have a go at one of the training dummies, which even the girls tried out. They all cast a cutting curse, and Hermione, Ron, and Ginny all had the most powerful spells ranging from a six to seven on a scale of ten.

"Let's see you take a go, Harry." Neville commented. He was in a great mood, as his spell had just come in under the others'. He really liked his new wand.

Knowing he could outdo all his friends with the simple spell, Harry thought about refusing. But his friends would badger him endlessly, so he gave in and approached the target. Already committed, Harry grinned as he pulled Hedwig's wands out of his boot, and took aim.

"New wand holster, Harry?" Ron asked. He hadn't really paid attention to where Harry usually drew his wand from, but he was pretty sure it wasn't from his boot.

Harry nodded, and then motioned for the others to back away. They all raised their eyebrows (they were already far enough back they thought), but did so without question. Harry took a deep breath, concentrated on the task at hand, and then spoke loudly, not quite yelling, "Diffendo!"

As he knew if would, a strong light escaped his wand's tip, measuring at least twice as wide as it should have. His spell also registered somewhere between nine and ten on the gauge, and was closer to the ten side than the nine. Using the extra focus Hedwig's wand provided, along with his extra understanding of how the spell worked thanks to his reading on magical theory, Harry had cast a cutting curse few could improve upon.

"Whoa, Harry. That was powerful!" Ginny praised him. "I never knew you were that good. I'd bet not even seventh years could do that well."

Harry blushed as he replaced his wand. He didn't take compliment well, and this wasn't the first one of the day.

"Well, you've got to remember that I've been practicing all summer long. Plus, that's a third year spell, so I've been using it for awhile. I'm sure you could do the same with enough practice."

The others thought not, and argued slightly as they moved into the next room; Harry's personal quarters. To say the group was impressed was an understatement. They all marveled at the comfortable furniture and Potter family tapestries in the sitting room, and when moved into the kitchen, Ron couldn't help but snack out of the stocked ice box. Harry had to explain the spells that kept a never ending supply of food available, and Ron thought that was the most brilliant thing he had ever heard of.

The girls all thought it brilliant as well, but not as much as Harry's bedroom. When they stepped inside the large master suite, all the girls' mouths dropped open. The room was exquisite.

Even Neville and Ron could appreciate the room's beauty, though they didn't feel the need to bounce on the bed, or rummage through the dresser drawers. Harry showed them all how the cots in the closet worked, and he even told them all that the clothing had already been in the closet when he bought the trunk. Ginny and Luna each found a favorite dress on the rack, and had quite a lot of fun holding up hangars to their bodies in front of the three way mirror.

The bathroom was great too, especially since it was a personal one, not like the prefects' bath. In fact, Ginny politely informed the group to leave her alone in the room, as she wanted to christen it herself. "Never again will I get the chance to use such a fine facility," she said.

Harry and Neville laughed, while Ron thought she was bonkers. "A loo's a loo," he thought.

When Ginny rejoined the others in the sitting room, Harry had already summoned six bottles of butterbeer from his stash, and had passed them around. All were pleased, even Hermione. She had wanted to scold Harry for breaking school rules, but couldn't think of a rule that prevented students from keeping butterbeer in their trunks. Besides, as long as the house-elves didn't have to suffer for the work, she was happy. Thank Merlin she didn't know about Dobby and Winky yet.

Another hour passed as the six played games and talked lightly about the first weeks of school. Harry and Hermione teamed up against Ron on Harry's new muggle chess set. Ron still won, but only barely. It had taken him awhile to get used to making his own moves, and that had given Hermione and Harry an early advantage which they slowly lost.

Neville, Ginny, and Luna played a game of Exploding Snap, and had a lot of fun. Apparently the deck of cards were made to follow an old set of rules, so it was interesting for the youngsters to experiment with.

When the last card exploded, they also gave the Potter family tapestry a closer look. Ron, Ginny, and Neville recognized many of the names that Harry didn't, and told him a lot about the other families. Luna found a common ancestor on her mother's side of the family, but it was generations back. Hermione was just happy to see that the Potters had historically no problems intermarrying with muggles.

The group of friends returned to their common rooms well before dinner started, but all in a good mood. Harry too was happy that he finally shared a little more with his friends. They still knew far from the whole truth (he didn't show them his prison compartment for instance), but at least he was opening up. It was his good mood that allowed Harry to eat a hardy dinner, and then slip off unnoticed afterwards to the second floor. There was a moaning someone he had to greet.

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Sunday morning, while the castle's students caught up on the week's homework, Harry used the secret passage to Honeyduke's, and then apparated to Diagon Alley. He had a bag on him with his recent horde of goodies, his invisibility cloak, and his money bag, but he didn't have much planned. He just came to fulfill his promise to Mr. Olivander, which he made earlier that past summer.

The deal made; in exchange for creating his new wand, and provided one to Neville at no cost; was to provided Mr. Olivander with the story of how Harry killed a basilisk his second year, as well as to provide the remaining fangs for wand cores. Because the basilisk was not only rare, but also extremely deadly, Olivander had never used the ingredient as a wand core before. But any wand maker would love the chance to experiment, and Harry was giving Olivander that chance.

The night before, after dinner while everyone else wasn't paying attention, Harry had slipped into the second floor girl's lavatory to access the chamber of secrets. He had to hold a conversation with Myrtle for awhile so she wouldn't cry, and then he opened the sink's entrance, and disappeared. Hedwig had decided to come with him this time, as she probably detected Harry was a little nervous.

Not wanting to disrupt classes, Hedwig had taken to staying on her perch in Harry's dorm room most of the day. She occasionally made an appearance at meals, but even then Harry got swamped with questions from the other students. Only in his dorm room and the Gryffindor common room could Hedwig comfortably come and go as she pleased. Harry hoped that with enough time, that would change.

The dank chamber was much as Harry remembered it, only it seemed smaller. Either because it didn't hold as much fear for him, or because he had grown, Harry didn't know. Even the size of the basilisk wasn't the same, although that could be attributed to the decaying and rotting corpse it was now. Harry smelt it before laying his other sense on it, and had to cast a bubble head charm over his head before he could progress into the depths of the chamber. The second entrance door had been left open this whole time, so all the insects and vermin had three solid years to feast upon the snake's grotesque body. Only the sheer size of it prevented the remains from being totally stripped down to the bone.

After pulling all the salvageable fangs that remained (there were thirty one left), Harry banished the body away. It was so large that he had to do it in sections, but magic still made quick work of the rather large job. Harry then cleaned and freshened the room as best he could, and explored some of the pipes as well. The chamber was much larger than Harry originally thought, and he promised himself to come back at another time to further explore. After placing the fangs in a thick leather pouch he conjured, Harry returned to his dorm. Ten of the fangs he added to his store of potion ingredients, and the other twenty one he carefully wrapped for the next day. It wouldn't do good to accidentally stab himself with a sharp tooth.

Olivander appreciated the story immensely, and appreciated the fangs even more. He also inquired as to how Harry's new wand was treating him, and Harry assured him it was working beyond his expectations. That made Olivander even happier, and Harry left before he could get further creeped out. Mr. Olivander's version of happy showed an almost maniacal look on his face.

It was when Harry was leaving the wand shop did he feel the first real twinge on his left wrist. At first Harry didn't know what the pain was,

but then he remembered the Dark Arts detector in his watch. He had set it to pick up signals of a Dark Mark buy using Snape as a guinea pig, and the expensive watch was finally paying off. As opposed to making a siren sound, or flashing lights, Harry had set the detector to prickle his wrist in warning. Looking around he didn't see anyone take notice of him (he was in disguise again), so Harry slipped into the small space behind Olivander's wand shop to put on his invisibility cloak.

Once flung over his head, Harry reemerged into the busy street, careful not to bump into anyone. He followed the twinge in his wrist until it became stronger, and narrowed down his list of potential Death Eaters to three people. There were two men and one woman walking in a group, and Harry couldn't tell where the signal was coming from.

He had to follow the group another twenty minutes, and into three different shops, before they split up separately. The couple wanted to shop for some new robes, while the single man headed towards the apparition point in Diagon Alley. Luck was with Harry as he turned out to be the one where the signal was coming from, and Harry followed.

Once past the cauldron shop, the street thinned out enough for Harry to make his move, and he quietly stepped closer to the man, drawing his wand from his sleeve as he went. Harry was getting a little nervous, but this is what he had planned on doing for almost a year now. He just didn't think the opportunity would present itself so soon.

Without making a sound, Harry cursed the man mute, and then summoned him to an empty alleyway where they could have some privacy. The man put up a struggle once he realized he was being attacked, but since he couldn't see his attacker, and couldn't scream out for help, he didn't stand a chance.

Once alone, Harry stunned him, blindfolded him, bound him with ropes, and only then removed his invisibility cloak. He packed it away in his bag, and apparated them both out of there before someone might notice. Forced apparition, the means to bring someone along with you under your own power, was incredibly draining, and was one of the Ministry spells Harry had illegally learned months ago. The

method wasn't all that different from regular apparition, it just took a lot more power. And of course it could be very painful for the person along for the ride. Somehow, Harry wasn't concerned with the Death Eater's feelings.

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After tying up loose ends that night, Harry made his usual trip into the past, while his other self climbed out of the trunk, and got to bed as soon as the patrol with Cami was complete.

The next week passed by quickly, and classes came easier to Harry the more he read ahead. The D.A. was a confirmed hit, and Harry already had an idea of which members from the novice group he wanted to move ahead. Draco and his goons had made one last ditch attempt to join, but even their girly whining to Professor Snape did no good. When presented with the news that Malfoy and the others weren't allowed in because Potter had refused them admission, Snape had gone right to the Headmaster to complain. But when Dumbledore presented him with the fact that over twenty other Slytherins were part of the D.A., Snape couldn't argue that Harry was playing favorites. Draco was outraged when he found out, and Ron had a grand time teasing him that day in lessons.

Soon the weekend approached yet again, and with it, the long awaited Gryffindor Quidditch team tryouts. Ron was excited, Ginny was worried about securing her spot as chaser, and Harry was nervous about running the competition. Gryffindor needed an excellent team this year in order to compete with the other houses, and filling in four positions was no easy task. However Professor McGonagall assured Harry that he would do a good job, and he swore not to let her down.

So early that Saturday morning, after not being able to eat more than a piece of toast for breakfast, Harry made his way down to the pitch carrying his trombone case. Time to fly!

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AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, there you go everyone. Hopefully you all enjoyed this chapter more than the previous one, as it was a bit more fast paced. I'm finally getting the school year off its feet (and it's about bloody time!), and the next chapter will stretch out over nearly a month. For those action fans out there, you can expect Quidditch tryouts, the first Quidditch game, and Harry capturing a few more inmates all in the next chapter. We'll also soon see what Voldy's up to, and what he has planned for Harry this year. For those romantics out there who've been bothering me about Harry's relationship with Ginny, hopefully you can see the start of some stuff in this chapter. From here on in it simply snowballs, but still at a respectable pace. I'm also keeping Amber, Cami, and Cho around to utterly confuse Harry's hormones. He is a teenage boy after all. And for you perverts out there, we'll be seeing more of Harry's X-Ray vision soon as well. One credit I'd like to give is that line about the sponge contraceptive. It's modified from the original line (this girl oozed sex more than a sponge contraceptive), from the movie "100 Girls." I don't think it ever hit theaters, but it's a great teen comedy for those movie buffs out there. Got a great cast as well. 5 house points if anyone's seen it. Don't know what else to say really. Schnoogle posting is going well (3 chaps up), as is my yahoo group. So thanks for sticking with this story everyone, and I'll try to keep you all thoroughly excited. Ross.

Tombadgerlock – you make an interesting point about how according to the number of phoenixes in the world according to my fic, and how many feathers they donate for wands, there's not nearly enough for all the wands of the 100,000 people attending the World Cup in GoF. I do have a defense though. First off, that's wizard in the world (World Cup), not just the UK. And we know that Olivander's shop isn't the only provider of wands in the world. So maybe other wand makers use other cores than the three that Olivander uses. And who says that phoenix feathers aren't the most rare of those three? Besides, I get the feeling from cannon that Mr. Olivander has an extreme bag log of wands to last for many generations. I've done the math, and I estimate only 6,000-8,000 magical people in the UK. Here's my reasoning. Figure the average life span of a witch or wizard is 150 years old. There are 7 years at Hogwarts, so $150/7=21.4$. At Hogwarts at any one time there are about 300 students ($10 \times 7 \times 4 = 280$). That's 10 kids per house per year, times seven years, times four

houses. So we can see, $300 \times 21.4 = 6,400$. So we can see, there's no way that all those in attendance at the World Cup came from Britain. I know I didn't really have to do all this math to answer your question, but it might come into play later in my fic, plus it was just fun. Has anyone attempted to justify the number of magical people in the UK before according to cannon? I haven't seen it.

Faraway – I'm glad you're liking this story so much. I'm sorry that you feel disappointed with the lack of ships in my fic, but you have to understand this is a cannon story, and JKR does not write ships. I'm going to involve some slight H/G, but not much. But hopefully you've seen from this chapter that I'm getting their. After all, Harry got to second base with Gin, without even getting kissing her first! Now that's my type of guy!

Numba1 & Csferosha – I think Dumble always knew Snape was hard on his students, and even harder on Harry, but he never knew the extent Snape's verbal abuse went. I don't see any Headmaster condoning that type of verbal assault on students as frail as Neville (1st 4 years), so I can't believe that Dumble really was aware. Many of you think that Dumble knows everything that goes on within the castle, but obviously from cannon he doesn't. He's not aware of the basilisk, of impersonating Crouch Jr., the cup portkey, etc. Also, do you happen to realize that whenever Harry and Dumble talk, Dumble always asks, "Do you have something to tell me Harry?" I think that Dumble just projects knowledge, and lets people think he really knows that much.

Lauren – Hopefully you're back to liking my writing. Glad you liked the Rita Skeeter article, you're the only person to mention it. I like it too, even though writing it was a challenge. I don't do news reporting to well I've found out, but I think the end result was fine. Maybe I'll tweak it later, like I'll tweak my sorting song. Good to have you back.

Miss Teinge – Good question about both Harry's scars hurting. To answer your question, no, only the present Harry feels it. This is just a made up answer of course (I doubt I'll be addressing this issue in my fic), but I reason it this way. The Harry in the trunk has already experienced the vision the first time around, so he's prepared for it, and can block out its effect, or something like that. Or maybe Harry

can only experience the visions once, because of his unique link with Voldy. Whatever, I 'm just making this stuff up. AS if my time traveling scheme wasn't confusing enough already. Anyways, I hope I've sorta answered your question.

Lisienna – I know that my average reviews isn't 100 per chapter, I just wrote that I'm getting close to a hundred per chapter now. The first five chapters didn't have many reviews (maybe 50 in total), so it's all picked up from there. Chapter 15 had about 75 reviews, and 16 so far had close to 90. Thanks for reading. Maybe you can appreciate the math in the first AN above.

Tanydwr – Feel free to use my trunk idea, or any others for that matter, as long as you don't use too many at once, or do the cut and paste thing. And of course if the ideas are real specific, it would be nice for you to give credit in author notes. Thanks for reading.

AlphaPhi – Wormtail spent a month in a cell between the time he was captured by Harry and Remus, to the time he was unmasked by Harry at the press meeting. If you read more carefully, you'll see that Harry's the one to stun Wormtail before unmasking him. Hope that clears up your confusion.

Amarilis – I like you. You like all my favorite parts, so I like you.

Illucia – A summary is tricky to write, because there's only a limited space to use. If you can think of something else (or anyone else for that matter), please send it my way, and I'll take a look.

Kateydidn't – Glad to see you stuck around. I loved your story, so it's nice to hear from you. Yes, I know the Crucio scene needs some work, and I'll probably rework that in my Schnoogle version so that Harry has a little more difficulty agreeing to use that curse. Keep up the good work, both your writing fic and in writing reviews.

H-Ruf – Glad you made it past the first two chapters. In my defense, all JKR's books have a few pages of summary, so I felt I had to do it in the first chap as well. 2nd one wasn't all bad, but it was kind of boring, that's why I made it short. Anyways, at least you like it now. I

promise no more going back to the way things were. Thanks for reading.

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I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving almost 100 reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit. A link to the site is on my bio page.

## Chapter 17 – A Whole Lot of Quidditch, and Some Other Stuff

More than thirty Gryffindors turned out for tryouts, which Harry was very happy about. Most of them were familiar faces, but since it had been so long since Gryffindor had held Quidditch tryouts, most had no idea what to expect. It was the year before Harry started school that the last large tryouts were held, so naturally everyone in the house turned out to see who'd get the coveted five positions.

The first thing Harry and Ginny did was address the masses. Naturally everybody assumed that Harry was the new captain, so that was the first order of business. Harry wanted it perfectly understood that while technically Ginny did have to try out for her spot as chaser, she was still co-captain of the team, and would be as much in charge as Harry was. So with that announcement, the two co-captains instructed the Quidditch hopefuls up into the air, to see what they were made of. A round of general flying was how they started things off.

Right from the beginning, it was apparent that at least some of the hopefuls had no real talent in the air. Those five dared not fly more than ten feet above the ground, and their broom handling skills were atrocious. In fact, Harry hadn't seen such bad flying since his own first lesson, when Neville ended up breaking his wrist.

Neville must have had a lot of practice over the years though, because surprisingly he was one of the better fliers out there. He didn't have the speed of Harry, or the liteness of Ginny, but nonetheless Neville was a strong, solid flier.

Dean and Seamus were trying out too, along with the Creevy brothers, a whole lot of third years Harry didn't know, two of Ginny's dormmates, and a single seventh year boy Harry had never talked to. Harry wasn't yet trying to match up fliers to positions, he was simply judging them all of their abilities in the air. Ginny was doing the same from the other side of the pitch, as she circled the potentials opposite Harry.

“She isss a magnificent flier, isss she not?”

As if he knew what Harry was thinking about, Seth spoke up from Harry's hand, almost scaring him off his broom. The ensouled snake which Harry had discovered on his newly purchased ring so rarely made comments in public, that often times Harry forgot that he had a constant companion.

"Yessss, she issss good," Harry answered back in Parseltongue. There was no question of Ginny's flying abilities, and with her new broom, Ginny was clearly the leader of the pack for the open chaser positions. "Since when are you interested in Quidditch, Seth?"

"Isss that what this iss called? I simply enjoy the open air."

Harry would have asked more, but Seth fell silent, and Harry had to turn his attention back to the tryouts anyway. Silently, Harry added three more names to the short list he wanted to dismiss right away. Along with the five who wouldn't leave the ground, these three had almost no control over their brooms. It would be impossible for them to add a ball into play, which would force at least one hand off the broom handle. They were just a recipe waiting for disaster.

After another few minutes, Ginny signaled him that she was done, and Harry landed by her to announce that the first part of the trials were over. Casting a Sonorus charm on his throat, Harry instructed all the fliers down to the pitch for the first round of eliminations. After a brief discussion, Harry let Ginny have the honors.

"Before we break up into groups by position, Harry and I want to thank Emily, Dan, Carrie, Saffron, Humbert, Colin, and Victoria for trying out. However, you still need more practice in the air before you can consider Quidditch, so please practice and try again next time if you like." The eight dismissed students didn't look too crushed, and they had to have suspected they'd not make the team. They just weren't good enough. The only one who looked a little miffed was Colin, as his younger brother Dennis had made the cut. In fact, Dennis was one of the better fliers. Light and small, he had coaxed the school broom faster than it ought to have flown. Not many people could have done that.

"For the next round of trials," Ginny continued, "we'll split up into the different positions. First up will be the chasers. So anyone wanting to tryout, join me in the air. The rest of you, take a seat or keep to the other side of the pitch."

Ron was already climbing toward the closest set of goals, with a goofy grin on his face. He thought blocking the shots of a bunch of want-to-be chasers would be a piece of cake. After three hours in the air, he knew he was wrong.

First up against Ron was Ginny, who despite being nervous earlier on, was confident as she shot quaffles through the three hoops. Harry and Ginny decided to let each contestant have twenty shots against the keeper, and Ginny managed to make eleven herself. Not bad, considering she was shooting one on one against a seasoned veteran. In a real game situation, having three chasers work together as a team would increase her winning shot percentage.

Two others didn't manage to make any shots at all, one of which was Seamus much to his chagrin. Ron thoroughly enjoyed showing up his roommate though, and would have continued to boast annoyingly if not for Dean, who managed four straight goals before Ron regained his focus.

A few others stood out, and one small girl even managed more shots than Ginny, but there was more to being a chaser than shooting goals. The position demanded teamwork, and that was the next drill.

After dismissing the two who hadn't managed a shot, Harry randomly arranged two chaser hopefuls with himself to go against Ron. Although not trained for the position, it was decided earlier that Harry would stand in for Ginny half the time so she could get a look from the stands. Besides, she would have gotten knackered, constantly being part of the three team assault.

It was clear that once they all had to depend on each other, some of the candidates couldn't keep up. They either couldn't fly in formation right, dropped the ball when attempting to pass or receive the quaffle, or couldn't work well in a team environment.

After the first three pairings, Ginny stepped in for Harry, and she had a go while he watched from the sidelines. They switched back and forth like this for the next hour, giving all participants at least two attempts with different partners, and only then met together while giving the other fliers a short break.

“What do you think?” Harry asked her once they were out of earshot of the others. Ron would have been included in the conversation, but he chose to stay in the air, giving the others some extra practice.

Ginny kept her eyes in the air as she answered. “Well, Natalie’s real good, and I can see us working well together. Neville’s a real strong flier too, but he’s slowing me down. And that third year girl, I don’t know her name. She’s amazing, but she seems shy. If we can get her to open up more, I think with practice she’d even be better than Angelina ever was.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, her name’s Constance, or Connie. Did you notice she managed more goals against Ron than you did? I think she’d be great for the team, as long as you all work together. Let’s try to put you three up there now. We’ll also do one of you, Neville, and Dean just to throw everyone off. I don’t want to make any final decisions without Ron. We can talk later tonight.”

Ginny agreed, and the last two groups made quick work in the air. Indeed, Ginny, Natalie, and Connie made an excellent team as chasers, and together managed to get all but five of the quaffles past Ron in their time allotment. Dean and Neville didn’t do too bad, but it was clear they weren’t suited for chasers. Maybe it was a Gryffindor girl thing?

Refusing to give anyone their decision, Harry and Ginny called out for a twenty minute break while they rounded up the next group of candidates. This time around, the beater positions were up for grabs.

“Ready Ron?” Harry asked. Stupidly Ron had agreed to step in to help with this part of the tryouts, and he was sorely regretting it now. He’d been in the air none stop since tryouts began, and was perspiring heavily. He, Harry, and Ginny all also wore their Gryffindor

team robes, and the heavy wool was beginning to take its toll. It was excellent practice for their soon upcoming Slytherin game though.

“Crickie, Harry. I’m tuckering out. I don’t know if I can keep this up for much longer.” Ron had promised to act as beater for the next part of the trial, as he had played the position a few times in pick up games at the Burrow. It was important to have someone in the air while the bludgers were loose who knew what they were doing, otherwise things could get out of control.

“Just do the best you can, Ron. I’ll take over for you in awhile. Wood always said I’d make a fair beater!” Harry wasn’t worried much. After all, how hard could it be?

When the break was over with, everyone was back in the air again. This time the exercise was to hit the bludgers towards the chasers. Ginny thought about asking for volunteers, but Harry decided not to. It wouldn’t be good for them to have a player end up in the hospital wing even before a game started. So Harry and Ginny took on the responsibility themselves, flying around as the moving targets. They didn’t bother with a quaffle, but instead just flew back and forth along the pitch, doing their best to dodge the charmed iron balls.

In teams of two, picked out among themselves, the hopefuls grabbed a club and set to the air to knock Harry or Ginny off their brooms. Ron had a beater club himself, but was told to use it only in case of an emergency. Still, he had to keep up with the flying balls, which was tiring enough.

Not having to worry about a snitch, an opposing seeker, or his own beaters, Harry had no problem avoiding all of the bludgers shot his way. There were a few close calls, but none that made contact. Ginny too had little trouble in dodging the shots, as she hadn’t to worry about her fellow chasers or the quaffle. Instead of a real Quidditch match, it was like trying to fly through an obstacle course.

This time there were over twenty students trying out for the spots, most of whom had already tried out for chaser. Neville was in the air again, as was Dean, Seamus, the seventh year boy, and the whole third year male dormroom. Only four girls tried out for beater, and

sadly they were either too small to too light to have much effect on the heavy bludgers.

Soon all participants had a shot in the air with the beater clubs, and Ron stumbled towards Harry and Ginny with weary arms. He was panting heavily.

"That's it, I'm done," he said. "I'm a keeper for Merlin's sake. I'm not supposed to fly all over the pitch and back. I'm going over to sit with Hermione. Good luck with the rest of tryouts."

Ron had lasted longer than Harry would have thought, and was glad to see his friend so happy, even if he pretended to be annoyed. If his jealousy had crept up overt the issue of being Quidditch captain, tryouts could have turned out to be very difficult.

Hermione was over in the bleachers, reading a book and surprisingly petting Hedwig, who was perched on her lap. Harry noticed she flew out as soon as tryouts began, and had been present the entire time. Such a loyal bird. Almost the entire house of Gryffindor was present sitting behind Hermione for a better view of the pitch. Not only were they interested in watching the tryouts, but they had to be on guard duty as well. No one thought the Slytherins above a little cloak and dagger reconnaissance work, so the first and second year students were made to alternate as look outs. So far, no intruders had been discovered.

"Alright Harry, next round." Ginny reminded him. This time, the hopefuls had to protect Ginny in the air. It was Harry's job (in place of Ron) to pose as the attacking team.

After explaining this to the others, and strapping one of the bludgers into the Quidditch ball trunk, Harry took to the air again for the final round of beater trials. He didn't particularly enjoy aiming the deadly iron ball at his fellow co-captain, but took solace in the fact that he was inexperienced, there was only one bludger, Ginny was an accomplished flier, and that there were two others doing their best to block his shots.

Right away, Harry and Ginny dismissed three contenders, one of which was again Seamus. While they had no problems aiming the bludgers at others, they couldn't properly defend their own players.

The rest did an adequate enough job, and after a long discussion, Ginny finally managed to convince Harry to release the other bludger as well. Now the conditions were more game like, and more dangerous.

For his part, Harry did a good job of sending the bludgers in the proper direction. He even once grazed the side of Ginny's leg, and had to stop until she assured him she was OK. True most of his shots were blocked and returned back to him, but he still did far better than he thought he'd do.

Another hour later, Harry and Ginny had dismissed another three possibilities, and paired the rest up in every possible combination. They were looking not for only the two best beaters, but also the two who worked best together.

Harry already had an idea who'd make the team, but again decided to table the decision until later when he could ask Ron to join the conversation.

"OK everyone, thank you all for coming out for the Quidditch team tryouts. We'll probably announce the new team members tomorrow after breakfast, but you all did a fantastic job." Ginny was addressing the large number of Gryffindors still waiting in the stands, while Harry had a drink of water and caught his breath. Ginny's job was over with, but Harry still had one more task.

"The only people remaining should be the ones who wish to tryout for the reserve seeker position. Everyone else is dismissed."

The stands cleared out as Ginny ended her announcement, and only a few remained. Tryouts for a reserve position didn't draw all that much attention. Ron and Hermione were packing up their things, and Hedwig flew over to rest on Harry's shoulder. Ginny was also gathering the notes she had taken that day. Harry had only taken notes in his head.

"Man Harry, I don't envy you right now. You got another hour in the air at least, I reckon. Think you'll miss lunch?" Ron asked.

Looking at his watch, and the number of Gryffindors who stayed behind to try out for reserve seeker, there was no doubt that Harry would be missing lunch. He moaned.

Ron smiled. "Don't worry mate, we'll kip you something from the kitchens. Hermione wanted a look down there this year anyway."

Hermione nodded an agreement. "Yes, I wanted to see if anymore house-elves had warmed up to my S.P.E.W. ideas. How about we grab something for you, as I'm sure we won't be able to leave without a basket of food, and meet you at Hagrid's later? We never did get the chance to visit him last week."

Momentarily caught off guard as he couldn't believe he forgot about Hagrid again, Harry quickly agreed as his friends left. Ginny had put most of the school brooms and pads away in the broom shed, and only the ones occupied by the six nervous hopefuls were left.

"Alright you lot, so you want to be a seeker? Let's have at it then. Everyone up in the air, and follow me. Try to keep up if you can." With another deep breath, Harry launched himself in the air for an hour long game of tag. There was no snitch in the air, but Harry didn't need one. He was the snitch this time, and the others simply had to catch him.

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Harry was sore all over. The moment he landed on the ground, there was nothing more he wanted than to crawl into a nice hot relaxing bath. Unfortunately, Harry's stomach was growling, and he had promised to meet his friends at Hagrid's. He saw Ron and Hermione enter the hut minutes earlier from the air, and made his way over as he packed his new broom back in its trombone case. All of Gryffindor had seen him use the new, unknown broom, but all were told not to let others know about it as well. If it meant a surprise for the Slytherin

team during their first game, Harry was sure no one would dare mention it.

"Hallo, Harry. 'Bout time you finally got to visiting me, now ain't it?" Hagrid greeted him after Harry knocked on the door.

Ron and Hermione were sitting together in an oversized armchair, with the customary cups of tea in front of them, and a plate of rock cakes sitting untouched on the large, wooden table. Harry was almost hungry enough to attempt to eat one of them, when he noticed the large hamper of food Hermione had balanced on her lap.

Harry took a seat on an ottoman, which was still too large for just him, and attacked the wrapped food with vigor as Hermione picked up her conversation with Hagrid. His mouth being full, Harry merrily ate while he listened, and got caught up on his friend's last few weeks.

It seems that Hagrid had made another trip this past summer. With the centaurs' new vigilant attitude, and the attack made on Grawp just the year before, Hagrid had been forced to move his half brother to a new location. It wasn't that bad though. Now living in better accommodations in the forest outside of Beauxbatons with Olympe Maxime as his companion, Grawp was much happier. Hagrid was much better too, as he had taught enough to his half brother for him to be more sociable to others, and being away gave his wounds a chance to heal. And whenever he felt the need to visit Gwarp or Olympe, all he needed to do was catch a permanent portkey Dumbledore had made for him.

Hagrid asked how all their classes were going, what they thought of the new DADA professor, and how tryouts had gone. Harry had finished the delicious meat pies by now, and managed to contribute to the small talk before they all left. Really, Harry missed spending so much time with Hagrid. Now that he wasn't taking the Care of Magical Creatures class, the only conversations the two shared were at meals or in the hallways. Harry promised to visit more often as soon as he settled down in his new schedule.

On the long walk up to Gryffindor tower, talk naturally turned back towards the tryouts. Ginny and Harry were both eager to finalize a

team roster, and wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon going over their notes. At their invitation, Ron ducked out claiming he was completely knackered, and still had to get a start on his week's homework. Besides, "I trust you both," he said.

Not wanting to disturb, or be disturbed by the many others in the common room, Harry once again motioned for Ginny to follow him away from the others, and they made their way towards the Room of Requirements. The room was quickly becoming a sanctuary for Harry.

The room appeared much differently than ever before, as Harry and Ginny both contributed to what they thought they'd need. Much smaller than the D.A. room, the comfortable space provided them a large squishy couch, a functionary flat table for writing, an elaborate scaled model of the Hogwart's Quidditch pitch, and a nice big chalkboard to work out new moves.

Ginny immediately took a seat in the middle of the couch right in front of the table, and started moving a provided quill across a blank piece of parchment. Taking a seat besides her, Harry glanced over and saw she was listing the positions available on the team, and another list of the most qualified names of those who had auditioned.

"What do you think, Harry? Want to decide chasers first, or beaters? Oh, and who did you pick for reserve seeker?" Ginny asked.

Grimacing, Harry answered. "As much as I'll probably regret it, Dennis Creevy was easily the best choice. There were another two that were great fliers, but he has more potential. I think after two years of hard training, he'll easily be able to compete with the best."

That sounded like a good thing, so Ginny didn't know why Harry would regret the decision. She asked.

"Because," Harry replied, "to say he was excited would be the understatement of the century. Now Colin and that damned camera will no doubt be at every practice snapping pictures of everything he gets the chance of. I do not need to spend more time with him. Do you know last year he actually snuck into my dormroom to try and take pictures of me sleeping? I think he's becoming a bit too fanatical,

and now with Dennis on the team, he has an excuse to get even closer. Merlin help me!"

Ginny couldn't help but giggle as she desperately tried to hold in a larger laugh. It was well known that Collin Creevy was more than just a fan of Harry's. In truth, he was one of the few openly gay students at Hogwarts, and the object of his affections couldn't be any more clear. It was a shame that Harry couldn't stand him, let alone share any of those same feelings.

"Don't laugh," Harry admonished. Even to him it was funny at first, but after so many years living with the problem, Harry only found annoyance. "If Neville was still after you with his puppy dog eyes, like he was after he took you to the Yule Ball, you wouldn't find it funny either."

That sobered Ginny up real quick. For the few months after the Christmas Ball in Ginny's third year, Neville had assumed they were practically a couple, and it had finally taken a stern talking to by both Ginny and Ron to get through the boy's thick head. Luckily Neville hadn't taken the news too badly, but Ginny could still remember the fear she had that he'd end up a stalker. Funny really; she was just getting over her crush on Harry, and someone else had almost latched onto her.

The player decision didn't really take too long. Both Harry and Ginny agreed who the two other chasers should be, so there was no argument to be had. Natalie McDonald, a fourth year, and Connie, the third year who scored more goals than Ginny did, were the two obvious choices. Harry was also pleased that the chasers were staggered in years, so all three chasers leaving school the same year wouldn't happen again. Ginny didn't take that into consideration at all, but saw the advantage. Unfortunately, that advantage was at the heart of the argument they had over the beater position.

"What do you mean you don't want Philip to be the other beater? He was clearly the better of the two," Ginny argued. They both agreed on a third year boy to be one of the two new beaters, but Ginny favored the seventh year Philip over Harry's choice, Neville.

"I agree Ginny, Philip is plainly the better beater," Harry agreed. "But he's a seventh year, and I think it's silly to pick him for only a few games, and than have to find a replacement again next season. Neville's only got an extra year on him, true, but I might even choose someone younger if there was another decent flier for the job. This is clearly a rebuilding year for our team, and I'd like to pick new team members who'll still be around next year after we really come together."

Ginny had to admit that made sense, although she still thought the position should go to Philip. Unlike Harry, she knew him well, as he'd been a friend of her brothers'. He had never been able to try out as beater before, because Fred and George had already had the positions. They dominated on the team for five straight years, until the ban. The only reason he hadn't been picked as a replacement for them after they left, was because he thought it was disrespectful to step up in their place for only a partial season. Plus, he was already tied up with a lot of schoolwork.

"Besides," Harry further argued, "I think that Neville showed more teamwork than Philip did. And I was really impressed that he even tried out at all. Imagine, two years ago he never would have gotten up the courage to try out for the Quidditch team. After last year, Neville's confidence has really increased, and I think him being on the Quidditch team will do so even more."

Ginny couldn't deny any of that, so in the end she gave in to Harry's argument. After all, after the initial shock wore off that he didn't fall off his broom and break his neck, Neville had shown to be a very accomplished, if steady, flier. The extra weight that had slowly begun to turn into muscle last year was good for a beater's position, as it made for a solid platform to beat a club from. Neville wasn't as stocky as the twins had been, but still managed a strong hit to the iron balls, with extreme accuracy. And being a beater meant that he didn't have to rely on any fancy flying, like a seeker or chaser might need. He simply had to keep an eye on the two bludgers, and knock them away when needed.

There were conditions however, which Harry quickly agreed to. First off, he was the one who had to tell Philip that he wasn't picked for the

team because he was a seventh year. Harry wasn't looking forward to that, but he hoped that Philip would understand it was the best decision for the team. Harry also had to agree that Philip could practice with the team if he wanted, and would be considered a reserve beater. That way if anything happened to either Neville or Frank, the third year beater, he'd be available to step in.

"Well, I guess that's over with now," Harry stated as he continued to rub his shoulders. He hadn't stopped aching since his lunch at Hagrid's, and was deeply looking forward to a relaxing bath in his trunk once he got upstairs. He really should have left the beater work to those more experienced.

"Anything else you'd like to do, Harry?" Ginny asked. She had a mischievous smile on her face, and that never led to anything good. It was the same look the twins' wore when an unsuspecting student was about to bite into one of their creations for the first time.

"Ahhh, no, I don't think so." Now that the team was picked, Harry couldn't think of anything else. Ginny obviously had something on her mind though, and the only thing he could think of was....no, not that! Harry had almost forgotten about the earlier episode last week, but now he feared flying on their brooms had reminded Ginny about the incident. She was expecting an apology, he thought.

Ginny didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. The smirk on her face clearly alluded to the fact that she was waiting for him to say something else, so Harry swallowed his pride and spoke up. Merlin, this was embarrassing.

"Errr, Ginny, I guess....that is I mean...Ummm, I want to say I'm sorry for what happened last week."

Ginny's smirk turned into a frown, as she clearly had no idea what Harry meant. He didn't know that though, and took the frown as a signal that he had to really say he was sorry, not just make a general apology.

Looking straight down at his hands, not daring to look her in the face, Harry muttered very quietly under his breath. His face turned beat red as he said, “I’m sorry I accidentally felt you up.”

Ginny still had no idea what Harry was talking about, and reached over to pinch his leg. It hurt, and Harry yelled in unsuspected pain. However he was now looking her in the face, which had been Ginny’s intention.

“Now that you’re not acting like a first year anymore,” she said, “you can try that again, so I can understand you this time.”

Taking a deep breath, Harry repeated his apology. This time his face turned even redder, and the apology was agonizingly slow. “I’m sorry I accidentally felt you up last week.”

At first she didn’t know what to say, as she didn’t connect what Harry was saying to what he was referring to. A moment later though, she was laughing her head off, as Harry’s apology was so unexpected, and so, well, very funny.

“What’s so funny?” Harry demanded angrily. He thought it had taken a lot of bravery to admit what he had done, and he never expected to be laughed at. “I never meant to do that last week, it just happened! See if I ever try to help you from falling off a broom again.”

Ginny laughed some more, and there were tears in her eyes, but somehow she managed a response.

“Oh Harry, I’m not laughing because of that! Well, maybe I am, but not how you think. I just think it’s hilarious that you bring this up so long after it happened. I’ve already forgotten about that little incident. I never even wrote mum about it.”

Harry was horrified to think of Mrs. Weasley knowing about the inappropriate actions, even if by mistake, taken towards her only daughter. But what did Ginny mean about it being funny that Harry had brought up the topic now?

"What do you mean it's funny that I mention this now? You obviously were waiting for an apology."

Finally managing to control her pearls of laughter, Ginny shook her head. "I did no such thing. Personally I think that day was embarrassing enough for the both of us, and I'd be happy never to mention it again. I only asked you if there was anything else you'd like to do before we go back to Gryffindor tower."

Harry nodded, "Yeah, and you had that strange look on your face. I said no, and you still were waiting for something....Wait, you don't mean you wanted to do anything....er, with me that might involve....er, well, snogging or anything like that."

Ginny laughed again. "No Harry, I do not want to snog you, although it's nice to know you think the thought so revolting."

"I didn't mean it like that," Harry said. "I don't think snogging you would be bad. Wait....that's not what it sounded like. Oh, bloody hell. You know what I mean. But what was that look you were giving me if you weren't expecting an apology, and you didn't want to....er, you know."

"Look over your shoulder," was all Ginny said.

So Harry did, and noticed for the first time that there was a large padded table on the other side of the room, where there wasn't one before. It had a seam down the middle, a round hole cut out at one end, and was entirely covered in what looked like brown vinyl.

"I only meant," Ginny continued, "that when I asked you if there was anything else you'd like to do, if you'd like a massage. You've been rubbing your shoulders for over an hour now, and the Room obvious provided this table for some reason. I know I don't need a rub down. I had that done to me last week, thank you very much, now that you've reminded me. So I naturally assumed that you're the one in need. You must have subconsciously asked the room to provide some relief for your sore muscles."

Now Harry got it. The padded table was a massage table, and that's what Ginny had been referring to, because it popped into existence right in front of her. Now he was even more embarrassed.

"Oh, stop being silly." Ginny playfully scolded him, hopping up off the couch and pulling him up with her. "If the room provided the table, you must really need a massage, and I don't mind. Just lie down on your stomach and be quiet. I'd hate for you to say something else even more awkward."

It took another minute of convincing, but Harry gave in to Ginny's ministrations, and actually was looking forward to the back massage. He'd never had one before, and thought it might be a nice experience. Not to mention that Ginny would be giving it to him, who was admittedly a very attractive girl. There were worse things in the world that could happen.

As soon as his head landed on the padded donut shaped pillow, Ginny began to rub his back. The two hours that passed since the tryouts ended had allowed his clothes to dry from his sweat, but he still hadn't had a chance to shower. Honestly, he stank a little too, but Ginny didn't seem to mind. She too hadn't taken a shower yet, although she had changed her clothes.

"Merlin Harry, your back feels made of iron! You must be really sore and tense."

Funny, he didn't feel that bad. In fact, he hardly felt Ginny start massaging his back at all. Oh, that's right....

"Err, sorry Ginny, I forgot." Standing up, Harry took off his Quidditch robes and the short sleeve tee shirt he wore underneath. The only thing left on were his pants and dragon armor vest, which was probably the "iron" Ginny had thought were his back muscles.

If she was worried about Harry taking off his clothes in front of her, Ginny didn't show it. Instead, she only looked interestedly at Harry's vest.

"Is that...is that dragon hide? If it is, that must really be expensive," she commented.

Harry told her that yes, it was dragon hide, and explained to her quickly about buying the armor earlier that summer, as a means of protection. He had been wearing it everyday for so long, that Harry didn't even notice the extra layer of clothes anymore. It really did feel like a second skin, even though it was made of a very hard material. It had just been molded to his body.

Looking around, Harry was searching for a private corner where he could remove the vest, and done back his tee shirt, when Ginny just laughed at him.

"Honestly Harry, I have six brothers! I think I can stomach you without your shirt on. Just take of that vest and lie back down."

Nervously he did, as well as removed the two holsters strapped to his forearms. Both his wand and dagger joined the piles of clothing on a nearby chair, and if Ginny was startled by the extra weapons, she didn't say anything.

Once again laying face down, this time Harry felt every move Ginny's small fingers made as they kneaded his back. Surprisingly she had very strong hands, and wasn't afraid to apply pressure, which was a common mistake among the inexperienced. A good massage must have strong pressure applied.

"That feels really good, Ginny." And oh, it really did. Harry was in heaven, and had completely forgotten his plans to soak in his tub later.

"Thanks. Mum sometimes does this for Charlie and Bill when they play pick up games at the Burrow. They're not as young as they used to be, they say, and get more sore than the rest of us. I've never actually done it before, though."

Harry could only moan a response. He was feeling so relaxed, Ginny's next question startled him a bit. He accidentally almost rolled off the table.

"Harry," Ginny asked, "where did these tattoos come from?" To emphasize which ones she meant, her hands rubbed small circles on both his shoulder blades.

Once the question had fought through the fogginess of his mind, and he righted himself from nearly falling off the table, Harry cursed himself for forgetting about his guardian tattoos. Since they were on his back Harry hardly remembered they were there, as he never saw them. That fact that they still hadn't shown any magical properties, nearly eight months after he'd gotten them, was another reason why they slipped his mind.

"Oh, er, I got them this summer also. But please, don't tell anyone about them. They're kind of personal, and I'd rather not share them around. Hermione and your mum would just yell at me, and Ron would think they're cool and run out to get ones of his own. Then I'd really be in trouble."

Ginny agreed. Her mum would go into conniptions, especially after Ron started commenting on how "cool" they looked. He did enough of that with Bill's earring, and that was apples and oranges compared to permanent magical tattoos.

"OK, I can understand that. Funny, I didn't think you were the "bad boy" type, Harry. What made you decide to get these though? I know the dog looks like Sirius, but why a picture of your patronus?"

As Ginny continued to knead his sore muscles, Harry explained how he hadn't chosen the tattoos, but how they were formed by his subconscious. The process fascinated Ginny, and she winced in sympathy as Harry explained the burning sensation it had caused at first, similar to the Habanero Heath Crunch bars that Fred and George had developed, only much worse. Ginny was still young and gullible enough at that time to except candy from her older brothers, and had experienced those bars first hand herself. She could only imagine the pain of that feeling coursing through her veins.

"So you see," Harry concluded, "it's not a picture of my patronus; at least not directly. It's a picture of my dad. He's in his animagus form

just like Sirius is. I guess since my mum never became an animagus, her tattoo is a flower instead.”

Ginny’s hands paused as she took a look around Harry’s back. There wasn’t a flower in sight, and she told Harry that.

“Oh, I guess my pants have just ridden up too far.” Harry told her. “My mum’s tattoo is right above my waistline. I thought it was kind of a girly spot at first, so I guess that’s why my mum’s tattoo ended up there instead of someplace else.”

Nervously, Ginny’s fingers trailed down the length of Harry’s spine, sending shivers through both of them. At the thought of looking at the tattoo so close to his bum, Ginny for the first time realized she had been spending at least a half hour with her hands all over the naked torso of her former crush. Thank Merlin Harry was on his stomach, or else he would have noticed her infamous Weasley blush.

“May I....may I see it?” She asked timidly.

“Sure, just pull my pants down a little....wait! I don’t mean that. Well, you know what I mean. God, this is embarrassing. I’ve really put my foot in my mouth today.”

Ginny giggled as she agreed, and slipped her fingers under the waistline of Harry’s pants. Gently she pulled them down inch by inch, until the whole tattoo had been revealed. Small dark hairs were just visible that led further down Harry’s backside, and Ginny forced herself to pay attention to only the tattoo.

“It’s very pretty,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a lily this color.

“I haven’t either,” Harry replied. “Actually, I haven’t seen many lilies at all, but I think that most of them are white. The red and green come from my mum’s hair and her eyes.”

“Your mum had red hair?” Ginny asked. She hadn’t known that. And for some reason, she liked the thought.

"Yeah; auburn actually. I little darker than yours, I think. I'll show you a picture of her sometime." Harry felt the hands on his back pause momentarily, and could tell they were in the middle of an awkward moment. But what about, he had no idea. Boys really are dense.

Ginny started to move her hands again, after recovering from the shock that Harry knew her hair color without having to look at it. Most people knew it was red of course, but not many realized that it was actually a darker color than the rest of her family's. Most people just grouped her in with the rest of the Weasleys.

To break the odd silence, Ginny tried for a joke. "You know, if three years ago you told me to pull down your pants and have a look, I might have fainted dead away."

Harry chuckled, as she knew by the way his body raised up and down off the table quickly.

"Well," he retorted, "that just goes to show we've all grown up a lot since then. I'd much rather have your hands down my pants, then have you run from the room or put your elbow in the butter dish every time I see you." Awkward pause again. Very awkward pause.

"No, that's not what I mean!" Harry corrected himself very quickly. "Oh bugger, never mind." Thankfully he wasn't facing her, so he didn't have to look at Ginny's face when he kept making these atrocious blunders.

Ginny laughed again, and really started to work his shoulders and upper arms with a renewed vigor. "Shut up Harry, before you say something I'll have to tell Ron about."

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The Quidditch announcements went off without a hitch, and Ron was very happy with the choices made. Philip understood them as well, and was more than happy to practice with the team as a reserve player. It was more than he ever got to do before, so why not? Harry and Ginny decided to hold team practices three times a week after that, once in the morning, and twice a week after dinner. Since they

had the most new players to train up, the Gryffindor team had first dibs on booking the pitch. They had picked the best times possible.

Now that Harry's week of detention was long over, the Quidditch practices didn't bite into most of his free time. That week with Filch, which ended the day before Quidditch tryouts, was truly torture. For two hours after dinner every night, Harry was forced to clean parts of the castle without using magic. Not only that, but the castle's stock of muggle cleaning supplies must have been at least thirty years old as well. There were much better products on the markets, nowadays. His Aunt Petunia had made him aware of that. And to make matters worse, Harry was convinced that Filch let Professor Snape know ahead of time which rooms in the castle he'd be cleaning each night. Because whenever he started a new room, the amount of dirt and filth, not to mention graffiti, was unheard of. The Slytherins must have been involved to make such a splendid mess.

The D.A. lessons continued as well, and didn't drop in popularity at all. Marietta chose to stay behind in the beginner class because the memory wipe Kingsley had done the year before had erased all her knowledge of the meetings. To stay with her friend, Cho chose to stay behind as well. Not that she needed it, as she was one of the better members of the D.A. from the year before. But Harry didn't mind. After their horrible break up, he and Cho got along surprisingly well, and he appreciated the help she gave the other students. After the first two weeks, Hermione and the others had stopped coming to the novice meetings with him, and instead concentrated on the advanced class. Harry didn't mind. He didn't have nearly the amount of homework the others did.

The week following Quidditch tryouts, Hermione's birthday also came upon them, and Harry was eagerly awaiting the response he'd get from her gifts. After the obviously expensive marble muggle chess set, he wanted to get something for Hermione other than the usual book or candy.

Opening her gifts in the common room after dinner the night of her birthday, Harry wasn't disappointed. Ron had gotten her some sugar quills and a new day planner (magical kind of course), Ginny had gotten her a very nice skirt, which she had made herself, and

Hermione's parents had sent her a gift certificate for the bookstore in Hogsmeade, like they did every year. Not being that familiar with the magical world, Hermione's parents were never sure what to buy their daughter anymore, and took the easy option out whenever possible. Not that Hermione minded naturally; she loved books.

Harry's gift came delivered by an unfamiliar owl after the others had been opened. It had pecked at the window until a third year girl let it in, and it had immediately flown over to Harry.

Untying the parcel from the owl's leg, he handed the gift over to Hermione with a huge smile on his face. "Here you go Hermione, Happy Birthday!"

Ginny and the others excitedly encouraged Hermione to rip open the wrapping paper, but Hermione would have none of that. If she took the time to carefully unfold the paper, she could always use it for something else later. It was one of her more annoying habits her friends had been trying to cure her of ever since they met her.

"Ohhh, a book, how surprising!" Ron commented once he saw the gift. Indeed it was a book, but not a new one. It was old and battered, and there were a few pages dog-eared and stained in some places. Hermione didn't care though once she saw the title.

"Ohhh, Harry, where ever did you find this!" She squealed. "I've been looking for a book about house-elves for years now, but I've never been able to find more than a few passages. This is an entire book on them!"

Harry grinned. "I know Hermione. This is one of the books I discovered in my parents' vault. It's part of a complete set of books about different magical beings and beasts. Sorry I can't give it to you permanently, but you can borrow it for as long as you like, and I've found a neat copying spell you can use as well. I've already read it, and I think you'll love the info inside. The book details the complete history, culture, and society of house-elves dating back to their origins, from when they split off from proper elves. I figured this could help you hammer out some practical ideas for S.P.E.W. If you want to read the book though, you have to promise me something."

Hermione would do anything to be able to read the book, and said as much. What Harry made her promise though confused her.

"You have to promise me you'll put off making more clothes for the Hogwart's house-elves until you completely read this book, and understand their culture a little more. I saw you breaking out the knitting needles last week, and I know you plan to make more hats."

"But Harry, they liked the hats last year!" She argued. "Every single one got picked up by the elves. I must have set at least three dozen elves free with that. Why should I wait to do more?"

"Because," Harry explained, with a hint of seriousness in his voice, "last year only Dobby picked up the hats. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I didn't want you to be disappointed. After you started to hide the hats around the tower, all the house-elves refused to enter except for Dobby. Do you know he actually wears at least a dozen of your hats at once? Anyways, Dobby's no longer working at Hogwarts, and I don't want to make this place a pigsty. I'm not saying you have to give up on your ideas about freeing the house-elves from slavery, I just want you to understand the results of your actions first. That's why I got you this book."

Hermione had a pensieve look on her face, but nodded an understanding. For the amount of time it would take her to read the book, she could put off making new clothes.

"Gee Harry, what a great birthday gift!" Neville joked around. "Hermione gets a library loan from you, as well as a lecture. No offense or anything, but for my birthday can I just have some candy?"

The rest of the friends laughed at the joke. It really was an odd gift if you thought about it, but it wasn't Harry's only gift.

"You didn't think that was the only thing I got Hermione, was it Neville? Haven't you noticed that the owl who delivered the book is still here? And for that matter, why would an owl deliver a package that came from my school trunk, anyways?" Harry was grinning from ear to ear now.

Hermione looked over to the large tawny owl who had made the delivery, and switched her glare over to Harry. "Do you mean...." She stuttered. "Do you mean that owl is mine?" A look of hope was in her eyes. Not coming from a magical family, Hermione didn't have a family owl to use. She always had to rely on Hedwig or Pig to send replies to her friends when they wrote. She had gotten the chance once to buy an owl the summer before her third year, but had chosen to buy Crookshanks instead, because he looked so unwanted at the time. Presently, the ginger cat was playing tag with Hedwig on an empty chair. The two got along famously, especially after Hedwig transformed into a Phoenix. One of their favorite games was Hedwig picking up Crookshanks, and flying him up to the top of various four poster beds. Then the cat would jump down on the bed's occupants unsuspectingly, scaring them half to death.

"Yup, he's all yours," Harry told Hermione. "I wrote Eeylops's Owl Emporium a week ago, saying that I wanted to buy the most intelligent looking owl they had, for the most intelligent witch at Hogwarts, and they sent this tawny owl here. Hedwig has been checking up on him ever since in the owlery. He's only a few months old, so he hasn't been named yet. I thought I'd let you name him."

Hermione was on him like white on rice in mere seconds. Before Harry even finished his explanations, Hermione was practically sitting on his lap, with both arms wrapped around his neck, hugging him hard.

"Oh Harry, this is the best birthday ever! I love the house-elf book, and I absolutely adore the owl!" She had backed off a little by now. Ginny and Neville were both snickering at the flustered look Ron had on his face. He hadn't gotten that type of response for his gift to Hermione.

"The most intelligent looking owl you say?" Hermione asked, as she now was stroking the male owl's feathers gently, looking into his eyes. "If that's so, than I'll name him Rowen. After Rowena Ravenclaw, the most intelligent founder of Hogwarts. How about it," she cooed to the owl, "do you like that name, Rowen?"

Rowen did, as well as Hedwig and Crookshanks. Crookshanks still kept his distance, but at least he didn't treat Rowen like he had treated Scabbers at first.

"But Harry, aren't students only allowed one pet at school?" Ginny asked. She hated to put a damper on things, but Hermione wouldn't be allowed two pets if Rowen was found out.

Shaking his head, Harry replied. "Nope, that rule only applies to new students attending Hogwarts for the first time. I'm sure it's another loophole in the rulebook, but they can't force Hermione to only have one pet. I looked it up to make sure, and even checked with Professor McGonagall. Until they change the rules, both Rowen and Crookshanks are safe."

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As the week of Hermione's birthday passed by, and the school settled into its permanent schedule, Harry, Ginny, and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team worked hard during team practices. Three times a week, for two hours a day, they flew hard and they flew fast.

Neville and Frank, the two beaters, worked real well together, and they were both equally matched. Frank was one of the largest third years Harry had ever seen, so his size and strength wasn't an issue. In fact, the two worked so well together, they even started to practice more difficult moves, that usually only seasoned teammates could pull off. Like hitting the same bludger together at the same time, which could add a lot of strength and momentum to the iron ball.

The three chasers were working together as well, although not as well as the chasers. It took awhile for the three girls to develop a system to communicate in the air, so they knew what to expect from each other. Actually, it took a letter written to Angelina and Katie Bell for Harry to realize the problem. Not having any former chasers on the team, there was no one to let him know ahead of time. So when Katie replied first, with complete diagrams of the hand signals she had used on the team, both Harry and Ginny were very relieved. They might have lost a week's worth of practice time, but it could have been much worse.

Natalie McDonald, the fourth year chaser, was a natural flier. Holding her broom between her legs, she didn't even need to use her arms to steer her broom even at top speeds. Therefore, so was assigned the job of trying to distract the other's team's chasers and intercept the quaffle.

Ginny was the strongest flier, even if she did need to at least use one hands to steer. Therefore, she was chosen to lead the team of chasers, and be the main player. She would draw the most attention from beaters and bludgers, but her maneuverability would help her out there. She'd also take every opportunity to make goals that she could, unless she was double, or even triple covered. In that case, she'd feint and pass.

It was the youngest chaser on the team, young Connie Wood (distant cousin to Oliver) who was their ace in the hole. So small and quick, she was virtually unstoppable on her broom, because she presented such a small target. It was her job to get into scoring position, while the other two chasers did most of the work of moving the quaffle up the field. Then, if Ginny approached the rings and found herself unable to make a goal, she'd pass to Connie, who'd use her uncanny ability to put the ball through one of the three hoops. At least, that was the plan.

The first game of the season, Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, was schedule for the week before Halloween, and by mid October, Harry and Ginny felt pretty confident in their new team. It had been a bumpy road at times, but overall they were a bunch of strong players who were good in their individual positions.

After every practice, Harry and Ginny always retired to the Room of Requirements, set up as the small room they had created that one day, to discuss the most recent practice, and to talk about possible new maneuvers or strategies. After they were done with talking, they often took turns giving each other massages, to loosen their tired muscles.

After that first time, Harry no longer felt any embarrassment in taking off his shirt in front of Ginny. He still always had his pants or shorts on,

even though she had made a few jokes about using a towel. After the third session, Ginny even asked the room to provide her with some massage lotions, that she could use. The first time that cold liquid got squirted on his back, Harry actually did fall off the table in shock, but afterwards they learned to warm the lotion up between their hands first.

When it was Ginny's first time to get a massage, both of them were nervous. She had jokingly mentioned it one day, that Harry would have to return the favor, and when he called her out, she bravely agreed. Harry had actually been happy, as he felt uncomfortable always being at the receiving end of the wonderful massages. He didn't want Ginny to think he was just using her, or that he always expected her to give him a massage, so he was glad that he could return the favor.

At first, Ginny only removed her robe, and Harry had to work through the material of whatever shirt she had worn that day. Soon though, they realized that the material always bunched in the wrong spots, and they weren't able to use any lotion with her shirt on.

So after the second failed attempt to give a decent massage still mostly clothed, Ginny finally worked up the nerve to remove her shirt as well as her robes. Harry always made sure to look away when Ginny disrobed, and only turned back once she was lying on her stomach, with her arms pressed against her sides. She wasn't topless though, which was what Harry feared the first time Ginny mentioned it. She still had on her support shirt, which was the witch's version of a sports bra. The stretchy material only reached halfway down Ginny's stomach, and left most of her back and both shoulders exposed, but at least all the important parts were covered up. And the shirt was so tight, that the three straps that lashed against Ginny's back didn't get in the way of his kneading hands, or the application of the scented lotions. The first time was awkward, but after a few more sessions, the two had gotten used to it. They both agreed, however, that they'd never tell Ron about this new development.

All while this happened, Harry also kept himself busy with his weeks' normal routines. Classes continued to become easier to learn, but he had still not managed to usurp Hermione from her top position in

Transfiguration. His greater understanding of magical theory helped immensely in Charms class, and Harry continued his work on his personal stunner and other like projects in Arithmancy. Harry suspected Professor Vector was becoming suspicious because Harry always was able to answer questions and never turned in his homework late, but so far she had said nothing.

His individual potion studies were moving at a fast rate as well, as Harry was already working with advanced potions even before he agreed to do the prep NEWT level work himself. Both his second and third batch of Veritaserum didn't turn out right (made possible to brew quicker because Harry now took it back in time with him), but he was getting closer. Harry also completed the potions outlined in his sixth year text, and was moving through them about twice the speed as Snape's class was. According to Hermione, she suspected the time Snape took out to insult and reprimand his students caused them to loose at least half an hour of potion brewing time each class period.

Letters from Amber were of two things not related to his learning or Quidditch that Harry had to look forward to every week. Like clockwork, her pink envelopes were delivered every Tuesday morning by her familiar barn owl, and each Thursday night, Harry sent off his reply with a random school owl. Hedwig had long forgiven him for not using her for those letters, as she got the chance to run errands back and forth between his friends. Even though they were at Hogwarts, sometimes Harry sent a short note to Ginny about a Quidditch captain meeting, or to Remus about a D.A. idea he had, just so Hedwig could deliver some mail.

Amber's letters continued to be flirtatious, but underneath it all she was just being a friend, and maybe hoping for more. Harry assured her she wasn't being too forward when she asked, and he even felt particularly naughty at times when he wrote back. His letters were no where near the level of forwardness that Amber's were, but Harry was learning how to properly talk to an attractive girl. He could have really used these lessons before the whole fiasco with Cho had happened.

The other thing Harry had to look forward to, not related to his work schedule, was an ability he discovered complexly by accident. One

Thursday night, after an especially demanding D.A. meeting, and an even longer Quidditch practice, Harry was absolutely knackered and went up to bed earlier. He was the only one in the dorm room at such an early hour, and had already completed his meditation exercise, when he couldn't get to sleep. That was the difference between being tired and being sleepy. No matter how hard he tried, his eyes wouldn't stay closed. Lying on his stomach, starting at the headboard in front of him, Harry began to space out when he noticed for the first time his x-ray vision kicked in accidentally.

It happened from time to time, when Harry's mind started to wonder, but never before had he seen what he saw by staring through the wall his bed rested against. Up until now, Harry had tried to refrain from abusing the gift, and had only taken a few quick peeks at some girls in the hallways to see what they had to offer. His two steadfast rules though, ones that he broke no matter what, was that Harry never looked at any girls he knew personally, and that he never looked under any of their undergarments. By sticking to these rules, Harry deluded himself that he was just a hormonal teenage boy, and not a complete pervert.

This time was different however, because the sight that assaulted him unaware forced his gaze still. Who would have thought that right behind his bed's grey wall, just three feet of solid stone separating the two, was the seventh year girls' dormitory. And who would have thought, that in the earlier evenings, the four seventh year girls all got together to have lingerie parties, to show off their new clothes.

It was a maddening sight for a young teenage boy, having four better than average looking to very attractive girls show off their scantily clad bodies to each other. Harry could never imagine his dormmates feeling that comfortable with each other in the near buff, but he suspected girls, especially after seven years of sharing a dormroom, were different.

When he was able to pry his eyes away, Harry buried his head in his pillow, feeling guilty for what he had just witnessed. True, he didn't know anything about the seventh year girls other than their names, but still, he knew what he was doing was wrong, and was he was

thinking was even worse. For some strange reason, Harry couldn't get the notion of looking back through the wall out of his head.

In the end his hormones won out, and Harry enjoyed an hour long fashion show of Gladrag's most stylish new garments. He still stuck to the rule of never peeking under the girl's underclothes, but, well he did catch a few looks when the girls took them off themselves. He couldn't stop them from parading around the room starkers, now could he?

So catching a few glimpses of the four girls became another part of his nightly ritual after he practiced Occlumency. For the most part they went about their normal, bedready routines. Only on Thursday nights did they all get together for the weekly fashion show. And if Voldemort did attempt to enter his dreams, the only thing he'd get a view of was Harry judging a hormone-ridden fashion contest, with four lovely Gryffindor girl contestants.

The only unpleasant event that happened in the weeks before the first Quidditch match, was Harry's unavoidable interrogation of the Death Eater he had caught that day in Diagon Alley.

Remembering back to the day he had caught the man, Harry had been so pumped up with adrenaline and excitement, he hadn't even realized how dangerous it was until he had the man hog tied and stunned. It had been pure luck that the Death Eater hadn't put up a fight, and had been subdued so quickly without anyone noticing. Somehow Harry knew that wouldn't happen again.

FLASHBACK

After apparating them both back to the Shrieking Shack, where the secret passage that led back to school was located, Harry made sure the man was secure. He wasn't one of the Death Eaters Harry was familiar with. In fact, he looked downright young; maybe only ten years older than himself. Obviously, this wasn't one of Voldemort's inner circle.

After a long trip back to the school and up to Gryffindor tower to get his trunk, and another long trip back to the Shrieking Shack with the

miniaturized luggage in his pocket, Harry threw the unconscious man head first into the seventh compartment, and then levitated him towards the empty cell that Wormtail had previously occupied. The stench of Wormtail's waste bucket still hung in the air, which only added to the atmosphere of the blood colored stains and wrought iron shackles attached to the walls. When he woke up, hopefully this man would be plenty scared.

After removing all the man's unnecessary clothes, and checking his body for hidden wands, portkeys, or other magical items, Harry went to throw the man into the cell when he noticed that there was no blemish on the man's forearm. Harry's dark art detector was still buzzing, but where was this man's Dark Mark?

Feeling nauseated, Harry made himself strip the man of all his clothes, and passed his watch over the naked man's body, using the dark detector like a metal detector, looking for Voldemort's mark. It couldn't be seen anywhere on the man's body, and for a moment Harry thought that Voldemort might have found a way to make the mark invisible, when his watch homed in at the back of the man's neck.

The Dark Mark, which still looked the same and was visible as well, was burnt into the base of the man's skull, right above his hairline. It was the man's hair that hid the mark, not any invisibility spell. For a moment Harry wondered why the mark was there, and considered waking the man to ask him, but delayed. It was already late in the day, and Harry still had to make another long trip up through the secret passage, avoid the Whomping Willow yet again as he exited the passage, and walk all the way back up to Gryffindor tower before dinner.

Besides, Harry wanted the man to sweat a little first before he was interrogated. That was the whole reason for the fake blood stains and likewise dingy atmosphere Harry had set up after all. And maybe if he was extremely lucky, Harry would even perfect his Veritaserum, and be able to use it on the unidentified man. Not caring if people noticed the man to be missing from work or from whatever family he had, Harry unceremoniously dumped the man in the empty cell, threw his cloths into a pile in the corner, and shut the door. Only once the door

was completely sealed off did Harry Enervate the man, and watch amusedly as he woke up in a dark prison cell, scrambling to cloth himself.

Exiting his trunk, Harry attention was immediately caught by a glowing light and soft whisper coming from another room. Whipping out his wand, Harry shut the trunk closed, before he realized it was just a false alarm. The noise and lights he noticed weren't anything to be alarmed about, it was just the group of wondering spirits he released form the Dementors' all that time ago. Harry and Remus still had no idea how he had done it.

The trapdoor to the secret passage was in one of the smaller rooms of the Shrieking Shack, so Harry made his way into the larger room to finally address the spirits. He had promised them he'd talk to them after school started, and already he was delinquent on that promise by a week. He couldn't avoid them any longer.

The largest room, the one that had been retrofitted years ago to hold Remus during his transformations, was packed tight with the fifty or so spirits he had released that night at Hermione's house. She still didn't know that had happened, and Harry had not intention of telling her anytime soon. It would only worry her.

The spirits had the same translucent appearance they had the night of their release, and as Harry entered the room, the image of the same man he had talked to that night approached him to speak.

All the other spirits gathered around as Harry explained to the man that he still hadn't found out how he'd released them from the Dementors. Harry explained how it was supposedly impossible to destroy one, and so far he'd been unable to replicate the golden patronus he'd used that night.

Some of the older spirits, including the farmer who Remus had talked to, had Harry's conversation translated to them by the others. Some of the more recent spirits, those who had died in only the last century or so, agreed that they knew of nothing that could destroy a Dementor. Truly, they were stumped. At least until Seth spoke up,

that was. Harry had almost forgotten that he was the one who told them about a Dementor's creation in the first place.

"Harry, these creaturesss you speak of are the soul-suckers, yesss?" Seth hissed.

Harry agreed. He had to remind Seth that they were called Dementors now, and that when he cast the golden patronus on them, he'd released the spirits they had ingested over the years, who presently had no where else to go.

"And why do they remain on this plane, when othersss move on?" Seth inquired.

Harry had wondered this too, but was only told that the remaining spirits felt like they couldn't move on because they felt tainted by the evil spirits they had been trapped within for so long. It was the same answer Remus had given him that first night, and they really couldn't elaborate. The best answer he got, was that the spirits felt compelled to stay on this plane of existence, to offer aid if at all possible, to atone for the part they had played as part of the Dementors' powers.

Harry explained this all to Seth so that he was up to speed on the situation, and again was stumped on what to do.

"If only I knew how the Dementors were created!" Harry yelled out in frustration. "Then maybe Remus or I could figure out how to erase whatever taint you all feel from them."

The few spirits who talked the most agreed that knowing the spells used to create Dementors would help a great deal, but none of them knew. Even the oldest of the spirits present couldn't remember a time when Dementors were anything more than the mysterious dark creatures they'd always been. The only one who was old enough to remember anything form the time when the Dementors first existed was Seth, and he didn't know anything else, did he?

"Seth," Harry asked cautiously, "do you know which spellsss were used to create Dementorsss? Or soul-suckersss, as you know them?"

There was a long pause before his ensouled ring answered. “Yesss Harry, I know the spell. There wasss only one actually, once the blood ritualssss had been preformed to preserve the dark wizards’ spiritssss. My former master shared the knowledge of all the spells he knew with me. I’m also well versed in potion recipesss, rune translationssss, and Arithmancy principlesss. I was his only companion for many yearsss, and he told me a great deal of what he had learned in his lifetime.”

Harry could only blink. None of the spirits had understood what the ring said, although quite a few recognized the language as Parseltongue. If they could understand, they would have realized that with Seth’s help, it might be possible to do something with themselves much sooner than they previously thought possible. Once again, Harry was amazed at his good fortune.

“Seth,” Harry hissed, “why didn’t you tell me thisss sooner?”

“You never asked,” was the only reply. Harry was so frustrated, he would have strangled his friend if his neck weren’t a centimeter wide and made of solid gold. Of all the things.

“Seth, we’ll talk about thisss soon. I’ll want to know as much about thisss spell and othersss, and all the potion recipesss you can recall as well. Thisss could be the information we’ve been searching for.”

Seth remained quiet, as was his habit, and Harry quickly brought the spirits up to speed. The few who still showed emotion looked comforted that they soon might be relieved of the present state of limbo they were currently in. The others only said that it was a good thing, and that they would await further instruction. Until then, they would remain at the Shrieking Shack.

By now, Harry would be late to dinner for certain, so he gave a quick goodbye to the group, put his shrunken trunk in his pant’s pocket, and made his way back to Hogwarts. He’d have a busy week ahead of him.

END FLASHBACK

It was funny the things he had found out in the days that followed. Seth had recalled the Dementor spell as “Concresco et Vivifiscu ta Infensus Phasma Phasmatis Adimpleo Malus Peror Pessimus Anhelo.” Roughly translated, it means “Give life and strong form to these dangerous souls to perform the wicked and great evil deeds that they crave.”

Not a nice spell to be sure of, and not the simplest either, but at least Harry had a starting point to work from. Just like the stunning spell he was working on, Harry planned to deconstruct the spell as much as possible, researching each part individually, and then reconstruct it to have the opposite effect. Harry’s end goal, after much planning and conferencing with Remus, was to use the spell on the spirits in the Shrieking Shack, to create a sort of “anti-Dementor.” It would be another corporeal form, but instead of being inherently evil, it would be inherently good. Harry didn’t yet know what types of magical powers or properties the anti- Dementors might have, but he planned to research as much as possible. From the day Seth told him the spell, creating the anti-Dementors had become Harry’s top priority. His personal stunner was almost complete, but the final steps could wait. Harry really wanted to get a head start on the bigger challenge.

When he told Remus at first, the older wizard had been stunned. He too never thought to ask Seth if he knew more on the subject, and after another bought of him mumbling to himself about “changing the way the wizarding world thinks,” Remus calmed down enough to talk out the problem with Harry.

Remus had no experience with Arithmancy (having taken Ancient Runes instead while at Hogwarts), but promised to do most of the research while Harry concentrated on deconstructing the original spell. Remus didn’t see the harm, as long as the research didn’t go any farther than just that, research. Under no circumstances, Harry was told, could he try the spell without Remus being present. The results could be too unpredictable, he claimed. Why, instead of creating an anti-Dementor, they could accidentally create a super-Dementor. No, they’d have to research the spell thoroughly, and only then, when all other options had been exhausted, would they attempt the newly reconstructed spell in a controlled environment.

There was also still the matter of all the other long forgotten spells and potions that Seth knew, but Harry wisely decided to put that off till later. One huge task at a time was still more than Harry could handle presently.

Weeks after, Harry and Remus were greatly encouraged by the results they were achieving so far. The spell deconstruction had gone much quicker than the work on the stunning spell, as Harry already had a lot of practice. Plus, Seth proved invaluable, as he too had advanced experience with Arithmancy equations. Remus had cancelled one of the four private tutor session each day, so he'd have more time to spend researching the various spell components Harry had uncovered. Why, with his unrestricted access to all the library's books, as well as the ones Harry had provided him with from his parents' vault, Remus found himself spending hours a day with his nose in a book.

By the week before the first Quidditch game, the spell had been totally deconstructed, and Harry was now joining Remus in general research. Remus had been amazed at how quick Harry had done the work (he still didn't know about the time tuner), but didn't ask too many questions as he greatly appreciated the help with the difficult research.

Because of the importance of researching the spell, as well as just the plain excitement from it, Harry had continually put off interrogating the Death eater he had caught. He or the elves still fed him twice a day, but other than that, Harry didn't pay much attention. For the first week the man had cried almost half the day, while the other time was spent sleeping. When he stopped that, Harry made a short trip via a secret passage and apparition into muggle London to restock his supply of muggle paperbacks. One that first day a fiction book appeared with his meager meal, the man broke down in happiness. Any change to his monotonous schedule was a blessing.

It was the day before the Quidditch game, Friday evening, that Harry finally decided to have a talk with the man he still didn't know the name of. Fresh from a shower after a rather long and comfortable massage/Quidditch captain meeting with Ginny, Harry made his way into his trunk's seventh compartment with a tray of food. It was a

feast compared with what the man usually got (not bread and water, but not Beef Wellington either). For some reason Harry was feeling generous, and decided to cook an extra portion of the shrimp stir-fry he made himself for dinner. Besides the colorful array of fresh vegetables and succulent shellfish, there was also steamed rice, a pudding, and a bottle of butterbeer on the platter. Harry hoped the man would appreciate this, and by result would share more information easily.

When Harry showed himself to the man, it had been quite the funny site. The man was squatted over his bucket, going about his business, and at the same time reading one of the books he'd been provided. It took a second for the man to realize that Harry was standing in the doorframe, and he had his dirty pants around his ankles.

Harry laughed, but was still cautious enough to hold the man at wandpoint, as he instructed him to finish his business, wash up with the supply of fresh water he'd had, and back up against the wall. Once done, Harry summoned the shackles attached to the wall, and magicked them onto his prisoner's hands. There was plenty of slack in the chains, but not enough for the man to reach Harry.

Once he was sure that the man wasn't going to attack him, he conjured a comfortable chair for them both, and a small table to put the man's food on. He levitated the tray there, not wanting to get close, and sat back as he watched the man's response. He still hadn't said a word.

The two starred at each other for at least two minutes, when the prisoner finally broke down, sobbing, and asked, "Why are you doing this to me? Where am I?"

Harry almost answered, but caught himself in time, and just told the man to eat, and that they'd talk afterwards. The man hesitated at first, but once he got a whiff of the banquet in front of him, his hungry stomach couldn't resist. He'd not had such a selection of food in over two weeks.

Even though the man's stomach must have shrank in size during his imprisonment, he still managed to finish everything on his plate, down to the last grain of rice. Only then did Harry speak.

"Before you say anything, let me tell you why you're here. I know that you're a Death Eater, and for me that's enough reason right now to lock you up for life. If you haven't figured it out by now, I'm Harry Potter, so you can imagine I don't care much for you or your master. Normally I'd turn you over to the Ministry to deal with, but currently they have a bumbling idiot as Minister. How he's still in office I have no idea. I also have no doubt that you have high ranking friends in the Ministry, who could either cover up your arrest, or help orchestrate your escape. So until I have more confidence in the capabilities of the Ministry, I've decided that any Death Eaters I come across will meet my guests here. If you've read any papers recently, you'll know awhile back I caught Peter Pettigrew, and turned him over to the Ministry recently. He was actually held here until then, in this very cell in fact. I had something to gain from turning him in. I do not have something to gain from you, however. So until I decide to turn you in, which I'm guessing won't be anytime soon, you'll be staying here. Any questions?"

Harry knew he was being cold and ruthless, but somehow he didn't care. No, that wasn't it. It wasn't that he didn't care, it was that he didn't want to show this man that he cared. He wanted the Death Eater to believe that he could care less what happened to him, as long as he stayed locked up. And while the conditions might not be the most comfortable, and the food might not be four star cuisine, it wasn't that bad. It was a far cry from the conditions of Azkaban, which was where the man deserved to be anyways. And besides, although he didn't know it, the elves and Harry were constantly monitoring the man's health and condition every time they fed him or attended to his waste bucket. He wasn't being ignored, he only thought he was.

The man had nothing to say really, once Harry had made his little speech. He tried asking how he'd been caught, and where he was, but Harry wasn't foolish to answer those questions. Anything that could possibly help the man get out of this situation, Harry wouldn't tell him.

After the man gave up, it was Harry's turn to ask questions. The truth serum he slipped into the man's food helped with that. Again, it wasn't Veritaserum, but it was still strong stuff.

The man's name was Sean Hazelton, and he was a junior Ministry worker, only hired a year ago. Just weeks after he began work, he was approached by his uncle to join Voldemort's ranks, and agreed after promises of wealth, power, and influence. The Dark Mark he received on his neck was the new placement Voldemort used for those working in the Ministry. Because a mark on the forearm was too recognizable, and too widely known now, Voldemort had been forced to change his ways for the newer Death Eaters.

Questioned about his crimes, Harry was shocked to find that Sean had so far done very little. Mostly, he just spied on his superiors, and reported relevant information to his uncle, which was his contact to the inner circle of Death Eaters. He himself had only seen Voldemort twice. Once, the night of his induction, and another time at a full member Death Eater meeting. Harry was pleased to learn the number of Voldemort's forces. If Sean was to be believed, which he was while under the influence of the serum, Voldemort now had close to forty Death Eaters, with various other spies and allies that were kept secret from his troops. His inner circle, the Death Eaters Harry was most familiar with, numbered only six now that most of them were back in Azkaban prison. Most of the new forces were young, new recruits like Sean was.

Harry had almost been horrified that he'd treated Sean so badly when he learned that not only was he a new Death Eater, but he hadn't actually done much of anything wrong either. Harry couldn't forgive himself if he imprisoned an innocent person by mistake. He vowed never again to keep a prisoner waiting over two weeks before interrogating them. They might prove to be innocent, or a spy for Dumbledore, which Harry hadn't even thought of.

Thankfully, at least for Harry's conscious, Sean wasn't completely innocent. While in the line of duty of being a Death Eater he hadn't committed anything but white collar crimes, there was still the matter of his initiation, which Harry asked him to describe in detail. Sean

broke down again as he replayed the night for Harry, but even though he felt some guilt over his actions, they had still been taken, and they had still been his.

On the night of his initiation, Sean had been forced to pick a muggle family at random, and show them no mercy. The more creative with the torture and pain that they inflicted, the more Voldemort would be pleased. To report on their actions, a senior Death Eater was assigned to each new recruit. McNair had been assigned to watch Sean the night he committed three murders.

Apparating to a random muggle home, Sean had at first used straightforward curses on the married couple and their young teenage daughter. However, not satisfied with cutting curses and simple jinxes, McNair had demanded more. Wanting to get the night over with as soon as possible, Sean had swallowed his own revulsion and continued with much worse.

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CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER)  
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Harry was disgusted with the tale the captured Death Eater told admitted too, and if he'd had any reservations or regrets about keeping the man in such bad conditions before, they immediately went away. Vanishing the empty plates and tray, Harry left the cell quickly, not wanting to spend anymore time with the criminal. He'd had enough.

From Sean Harry learned much. He now had Voldemort's force's numbers, the names of a few of the newer Death Eaters, and even a few names of the Ministry spies Voldemort was employing. If each of them had to do initiations similar to what Sean described, Harry was sure he'd have no problems housing a few more inmates. Now he only had to find the time to formulate a plan, and leave the castle, to catch a few more bad guys. He wouldn't rush things, but Harry assured himself he'd continue with his plans. Now more than ever he saw the pure evil that Voldemort and his followers believed in, and he was more convinced his plans were righteous.

However, all that would have to wait. Tomorrow he had a Quidditch game, and Harry wanted to be ready. After all, he and Ginny, and the rest of the team had to show Slytherin who's boss, didn't they? Yes, time for sleep.



The next morning, it was hard to convince his team to eat a sizeable breakfast, when he wasn't even taking his own advice. Harry hadn't slept well at all the night before, too busy recalling the horrid details Sean Hazelton had described about that innocent family. Harry figured he's gotten about four hours of sleep at best, maybe less. Currently, only Ron was eating a normal amount of food. Or at least, a normal amount for him.

"Come on guys, you'll need you energy out there on the pitch, trust me!" Ron was trying to encourage Frank and young Connie to eat. Neither were looking very well, but Harry put that up to pre-game jitters. He had felt the same way the morning before his first game. So had Ron, as matter of fact.

"He's right, you know," Harry agreed with Ron. "I know eating a lot of food isn't the thing you want to be doing right now, but it will really help with your energy levels once the game begins. Sometimes a game can go on for hours, and if that happens, you don't want to miss out on a meal." Forcing himself to spoon a bowl of porridge, Harry showed the team he was doing the same, even though he privately felt like crap. "Come on, eat up. You'll have to play Quidditch either way, so might as well be healthy about it."

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Neville all managed decent amounts of food, but the others simply couldn't. A piece of toast and a mouthful of eggs was all they could handle. After a half hour, Harry gave up.

"OK, fine. You've obviously have eaten enough, so let's all head to the locker rooms. Time to suit up and get ready! Ginny and I want to get in a few pre-game laps around the pitch before kick off, so let's move." Ron, Ginny, and Harry got up from their seats, but the rest didn't. They looked too nervous.

Giving them some Weasley encouragement, Ginny yelled, "Now, people!" That worked, and the rest shot to their feet and headed out the Great Hall doors.

Robes had been found for the new team members a week before, so it didn't take long before the team was suited up and gathered on the boy's side of the locker room. That was the largest side, and had the chalkboard and Quidditch pitch model that Harry and Ginny so often used to explain certain maneuvers. They had already had some warm up laps on their brooms, and slowly the newbies were looking more comfortable and confident as the game neared. With only a half hour to go, Harry and Ginny gave their pre-game warm up speech. Ginny went first.

"OK team, this is it! The first game of the season, and we get to show Slytherin that even with having to replace over half our members, that the Gryffindor Quidditch team is still hands down the best team there is! We've practiced long and hard for this game today, and you all earned the robes you're wearing. So I want you to put any doubt you've got about today's game out of your minds, because we're going to kick some snake tail! Are you with me?"

Harry and Ron, and to a lesser degree the others, all yelled out an affirmative.

"That's not good enough! I know for a fact that nobody out there is expecting us to be as good as we are, coming off a year with so many players leaving. Plus we all know Harry's going to be the first one to the snitch! On his new broom, he can't lose! Personally, I can't wait to see the look on Malfoy's face when he sees it! So I say again. I'm up for a serious snake squashing! Are you with me?"

This time the whole team cheered and hollered, pumped up from Ginny's amazing pep rally. Harry didn't know she'd had it in her. Apparently Ron didn't either, judging from the surprised, yet proud look on his face.

"Now that's more like it! That's all I have to say, just make sure you do your jobs, and we'll do just fine. Anything to add, Harry?"

Harry didn't think he could add much more to what Ginny had already said, but felt he had to try.

"Alright everyone, it's just like Ginny said. You'll all here for a reason, and that's because you're the best players for the job. Just do what you're supposed to, and try to ignore Slytherin's dirty tactics as much as possible. We all know they're going to play rough, so I want you to look out for each other today. Beaters, protect our chasers at all costs. Attack their chasers if you get the chance, but don't sacrifice our own team. And don't worry about distracting Malfoy from the snitch. I can take care of him."

Neville and Frank nodded and understanding. It was sound advice going up against a dirty playing team like Slytherin.

"Chasers," Harry continued, "you're going to be the target of most of the attacks today, so be careful. Move fast and steady, and remember what we talked about. Let Ginny take as much of the heat as possible, because she's a strong flier, and has the most experience. Natalie, help her out when you can, but also watch out for Connie. Connie, it's nothing personal, but you're the youngest and smallest player on the team, so I want to protect you at all costs. Slytherin will try to take advantage of you the moment you're unprotected, so we can't let that happen. Besides, we need you to be our secret weapon against them. With you shooting percentage, they won't stand a chance, right?"

Connie Wood shyly smiled, and the rest of the team agreed. They were really getting pumped up, now with only ten minutes left before play.

Harry smiled back. He was almost done. "OK, one last thing. Even though I know we're going to win, if something were to happen to prevent that, I don't care. We all know that everyone expected this to be a rebuilding year for our team, and no one expects us to win the Quidditch cup this year. Now, I personally think that's a bunch of BS, but what I'm trying to get at is this. Even if we should lose today, as long as we have fun and play the way we've trained, I'll be very proud

of all of you, as I'm sure Ginny and even Professor McGonagall will as well. Agreed?"

Ginny said yes, and the team cheered again. It felt better not having so much pressure on their shoulders.

Harry grinned and mounted his broom. "Alright then. Now that that's over with, forget what I just said, and mount up. We've got a game to win!"

A few minutes later, the new announcer (Shelby Fitzpatrick, a fourth year Hufflepuff) announced the team, and Harry and Ginny led them out for lap around the pitch before landing next to the Slytherin team and Madame Hooch. The rules and other team had already been announced, and it was time for the Quidditch match to begin.

"Alright players, I want a clean game from all of you. This is the first match of the season, so try to set an example. Everyone understand the rules?" Madame Hooch asked, and they all nodded their heads. The Slytherins somehow managed to make the movement seem insulting.

"OK, captains shake hands." Harry didn't enjoy it, but he didn't want Ginny anywhere near Draco, so he stepped forward to grip the blond boy's outstretched palm. Once he gripped it, Draco held on tight and drew Harry in close.

"I see you haven't even got a proper broom this year, Potter. My, what a shame that your Firebolt went missing. This will make my victory over you even that much more satisfying. Father got me a Firebolt you see, and he even turned up to see me trounce you into the ground. Prepare to lose, Scarheard!"

Harry wasn't too shocked to see that Malfoy did indeed have a brand new Firebolt cradled in his arms. After all, it had been three years since Harry had gotten his, and it was no surprise that Malfoy always wanted the best possible equipment. No doubt, he had begged his father like a little girl until Lucius had finally given in. Too bad Harry's broom was better than a Firebolt, even if it didn't look it. Draco was in for a rude awakening once the snitch showed for the first time.

What did surprise Harry though was Draco's admission that Lucius was in attendance of today's game. After a quick look around, Harry spotted the long blonde hair in the teacher's box, where he had been just a few years before. Why the nerve of him! Sitting with the professors, talking with Snape and Sinistra as if they all didn't know he was a Death Eater. Even Dumbledore, who was only sitting a few seats away, was looking calm and collected. Harry was glad that at least Remus wasn't anywhere nearby. He and Hagrid had chosen to sit with Hermione in the Gryffindor section, so she wouldn't be alone. Hedwig and Rowen were both with her too, one bird perched on each of her shoulders.

Gaining Harry's attention back, Madame Hooch cleared her throat.

"All right players, up in the air with you. And good luck to everyone." Then she blew her whistle.

With that, fourteen players shot up into the air, and Harry headed for his customary spot on top of them all. And just like he always did, Draco was marking him closely, not daring to rely on his own talent to win a Quidditch match. Then suddenly another whistle rang out, the bludgers and snitch were released from their trunk, and the quaffle was thrown into the air. The game had begun!

"New Gryffindor chaser Ginny Weasley takes the quaffle after it's released, and boy can she fly. No surprise there really, since she's a Weasley, and incidentally the first Weasley to play the position of chaser. Anyways, she heads up the pitch, passes to chaser Natalie McDonald, back to Weasley, back to McDon....no! A bludger sent by Slytherin forces McDonald to drop the quaffle, and it's picked up by Slytherin chaser Warrington."

The new announcer didn't have the personal spark that Lee Jordan had had, but maybe he'd get better with time. Regardless, the play by play commentary was enough to keep Harry apprised of the action as his eyes scanned the sky below him. Not trusting Draco for one second, he also kept a wary eye on his opposition. Malfoy would try anything dirty to get to the snitch before he did, and Harry had to be ready.

“Score, Slytherin! Warrington scores the first goal of the season against Gryffindor keeper Ron Weasley, who manages to make an incredible dive towards the quaffle, but just doesn’t get there in time. Recovering the ball, Ron passed to his sister, and Weasley takes the ball down the pitch.”

What? Slytherin had scored already? Harry only hoped that his team didn’t become discouraged at the quick goal made by the other team. If only to make matters worse, the Slytherins began singing the old familiar tune, “Weasley is Our King.” Last year had ended with that ditty being the victory call of the Gryffindor team, but the year had started with it miserably. Harry only hoped that the mockery didn’t throw Ron off his game.

“Chaser Weasley passes to McDonald just before she dodges that bludger sent by Crabbe, or is it Goyle? I don’t know, but one of them sent a bludger Gryffindor way, which Weasley neatly avoided. Now back in possession, Weasley approached the Slytherin goals, and is flying down low to draw the keeper out of the rings. Wait, she’s flying up now and is drawing back her arm to take a shot. No, wait! Weasley doesn’t have the quaffle! I don’t know how she did it, but somehow Weasley managed to pass the ball to third year chaser Connie Wood, and she’s taking a shot. Yes! It’s through, and we now have a score of 10-10. This looks to be an exciting game, ladies and gentlemen!”

Harry smiled as he heard Connie score. She really was very good, and they had to be careful of not overusing her to make their scores. She was their secret weapon, and Harry didn’t want to let onto the school how gifted she really was unless they really needed the points.

Unfortunately after tying the game up, Slytherin started in with their usual tactics. And just as Harry and Ginny predicted, the chaser were their main target.

“Ohhhh, a nasty hit to Gryffindor chaser McDonald by the Slytherin team. I don’t know if it was the bludger that cracked on the leg, or Goyle’s bat itself, but McDonald seems to be shaking off the injury, refusing a time out. That’s the spirit. However, in all the confusion

Slytherin chaser Montague has the quaffle and is attempting a goal. He's all alone now up against keeper Weasley, and shoots...no he feints to the right but shoots to the left. Score, Slytherin! Too bad Ron, you almost had that one. So now the score's 10-20 Slytherin, with still no sign of the snitch. Team seekers Potter and Malfoy are searching desperately, wanting to secure a sure win for their teams. We'll just have to wait and see who spots the snitch first."

The commentator was right too, so far Harry hadn't spotted a sign of the elusive golden snitch, but that wasn't uncommon just yet. It was still early in the game, and there was plenty of time to go. Flying even higher than before, Harry began his normal route of making concentric circles around the pitch, just as he'd been taught first year by Oliver Wood. Malfoy did the same, flying just behind and to the left of Harry, with an evil sneer on his face. Time to do something about that, Harry thought.

"Gryffindor back in possession of the quaffle now, and this time it's McDonald who brings the ball up the field, as chasers Weasley and Wood flying protected by new beaters Neville Longbottom and Frank Sparrow. Both boys are surprising new members of the new Gryffindor team, but captains Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley assure me that they're both excellent beaters. So far, they've done a superb job of protecting their chasers from the questionable tactics of the Slytherin team, but haven't shown us too many offensive moves yet. But I think I see why they're using this tactic. Yes, Natalie Wood draws the Slytherin keeper and beaters out to meet her, and passes to Weasley just at the last second. She shoots...she scores! That ties the game back up at 20-20. So far this had been a very evenly matched game, with Slytherin's strong offense being combated by Gryffindor's defense. It'll all come down to the snitch I think, and yes, I think Potter's spotted it! High atop the crowd Potter is diving towards the Gryffindor goals, with Malfoy hot on his tail. Will he catch up?"

Harry granted himself a small smile as he heard the commentary. Diving towards the ground so fast, he could barely hear it, but he heard enough to know that Ginny had just scored a goal, and Malfoy was right behind him. Harry hadn't really spotted the snitch, he just wanted to teach Malfoy a lesson.

"We're seeing some amazing flying here today folks. Draco Malfoy is chasing after Harry Potter on a brand new Firebolt, but is still unable to catch up to Potter who's flying an unknown broom. Potter's own Firebolt, which we all know was confiscated last year, has yet to be found according to Gryffindor house. No one knows what model he's using now, but whatever it is, is keeping the Slytherin seeker just out of reach. Ohhh, Potter swerves to avoid a bludger sent by Slytherin, but does so spectacularly. I still can't see the snitch from here, but at those speeds, it's no wonder! Malfoy is catching up some now after Potter's near miss, but Potter just changed his course, turning towards the stands now. It looks like they'll fly right over us everyone, so keep your eyes open for the snitch."

Harry had sweat streaking into his eyes, but shook it out of his face as he kept on flying. That bludger sent but Crabbe didn't get even close, but Harry used it as an excuse to draw Malfoy in even closer. Now he was so near Harry, he'd have no time to react to more subtle direction changes.

"What's this? I see a smile on Potter's face as he heads straight towards the professors' box, and he's heading right for them. Malfoy is right behind, and the intense concentration shown on his face is obvious. Never once beating Potter to the snitch since his seeker started, we all know he really wants this victory. Potter's just a few meters away now, and still no sign...wait, Potter changes coarse just barely to avoid a collision with some of the professors in the box, and Malfoy doesn't see it in time! He must have been concentrating on Potter! Ohhhh, that looks like it hurts! Ladies and gentlemen, Draco Malfoy has just flown right into an unknown number of professors in the stands, and only just managed to avoid plowing himself into the seats. And the hit adults appear to be none other than Professor Snape, and Malfoy senior, Draco's father. Both men seem to be alright, but Draco has taken a serious hit to the side, and only managed to fly away after the glancing collision with the two men. Slytherin team calls for a time out."

Yes, it had worked just like Harry wanted it too. Instead of trying a Wronski Feint so early in the game, Harry had instead just flown towards the stands, and because Draco was just a little bit above and to the left of Harry, he'd been unable to see just where they were

heading. Harry had steered Draco directly at the conversing forms of Snape and Lucius Malfoy, and had managed to steer away at the last moment. As Slytherin called their time out, Harry made his way back over to the professors' box, and flew right up to the two men.

"Alright there Professor Snape? You really should be more careful you know, Quidditch is a dangerous sport. And with Malfoy on a Firebolt, as unskilled as he is, that's just an accident waiting to happen."

"Why you little brat! You did that on purpose!" Lucius Malfoy screamed out.

"Now now Mr. Malfoy, don't get your knickers in a twist! It was a harmless accident. Harmless for me at least. I see no reason to get snippy. Lovely to see you by the way. I'm sure you're just here to send your master's best regards, aren't you?" Harry couldn't help himself. At first he only wanted to embarrass the man, but now, in his face, Harry couldn't help but tear into him.

In the presence of so many adult witnesses, Malfoy couldn't properly retort with his usual death threats, so instead he just huffed and bit his tongue. When most of the crowd turned away, he said softly, "I'm sure I'll be seeing you again real soon Potter, and then we can discuss that to great lengths."

"Now Lucius, why don't you settle down to enjoy the game." Dumbledore broke in. "It appears your son is looking much better, and I believe play will recommence soon enough. That goes for you as well, Mr. Potter. I believe your team is waiting for you on the ground.

Harry didn't have anything else to say, so he flew away. He had done what he wanted, which was to show Malfoy and the rest of the Death Eaters he wasn't afraid of them. Job done, Harry headed down to the pitch, where Ginny and the rest were waiting.

"Blimey Harry, that was some good flying. And Malfoy plowed right into his old man! Well done!" Ron was ear to ear grin. Hopefully, this would get him out of the slump he'd started the game off with.

"Thanks Ron. How's everybody else doing?"

Connie was starting to warm up some, and Natalie had finally shook off the rest of the pain from her bludger hit. Her leg would have a large bruise later on she was sure, but at least nothing was broken. Ginny was also in good spirits after Draco's accident, and felt up for some of the more difficult moves the chasers had developed.

Frank and Neville, on the other hand, were quickly tiring out. Not only were both Crabbe and Goyle hitting bludgers merciless at the Gryffindor chasers, but the beaters themselves were aiming their bats and brooms at the girls, as were all the Slytherin. Protecting their team from such dirty play was exhausting them completely, and Harry didn't think they could last like this for very much longer.

"Alright. Frank, Neville, just keep up as best you can, and protect Natalie and Connie the most. Ginny can take some extra heat, and I'll try to draw their fire as well. I know it'll be tough, but do your best. Next team practice, I see we'll have to add some endurance training to the list. Agreed?" They did, and when Madame Hooch's whistle blew, the team went back up in the air, and resumed play.

Draco was much slower and cautious this time, but still marked Harry as he flew high above the pitch. Neville and Frank were doing their best, but he could see that they wouldn't last much longer. Knowing Draco would follow him wherever he flew, Harry had an idea, and maneuvered them both between the Slytherin beaters and the Gryffindor chasers. That helped a little, but not much.

Over the next two hours, Slytherin got called on five fouls, all for cobbing, blatching, skinning, and stogging. Normally the penalty shots awarded to Gryffindor would have been a great opportunity to advance the scoring, but unfortunately all those penalties were against the Gryffindor chasers. They were so beat up and sore from the Slytherin roughhousing, that of the five penalty shots, only one was made.

The bad mood seemed to make the chaser's teamwork fall apart as well. Connie was forgetting her hand signals, Ginny tried to take on

too much responsibility by attracting all the bludgers which banged her up plenty, and Natalie began to get flustered and was dropping the quaffle way too often. They still continued to score, but not nearly as often as the Slytherin's did

"And that's goal to the Slytherins! Making the new score 220-90, in favor of Slytherin. Keeper Ron Weasley is doing an amazing jog so far today, managing to block so far eighteen shots after his dismal beginning, but a single man can only do so much. Gryffindor beaters have long since exhausted themselves, and with the Slytherins' constant attacks on the chasers of Gryffindor, the lovely trio of ladies just don't have the spirit or energy to keep up. If Gryffindor is going to win this game, it'll all come down to their seeker, Harry Potter. Hurry up Harry, you can do it!"

Shelby was right too. Ron was doing an amazing job keeping the constant stream of goals out of his set of rings, but it was hard to do when every time he passed the quaffle to one of the chasers, they either drooped the ball, or were fouled and missed the penalty shot. Harry expected there were more shots taken against Ron in just this one game, than in all of last year's combined.

Knowing he needed to end this soon, Harry gave up completely on his distractionary tactics, and really started to hunt out the snitch. The girls would just have to deal without having his extra protection, and do their best. As long as Slytherin didn't score another three goals before Harry caught the snitch, Gryffindor could still manage a win.

But being the thorn in Harry's side that he was, Draco spotted the new attitude, and made to stop him. Ever since he flew head first into his father, managing to turn just a little to avoid killing them both, Draco had been laying low, while instructing his team to play as dirty as possible. He didn't care how many fouls were called, as long as the Gryffindor chasers were too bruised and battered to make decent shots. And the greatest thing about fouls were, the referee's eyes could only be at one spot at any given time. So while Crabbe was roughhousing one chaser to gain Madame Hooch's attention, Goyle made sure to swing his beater bat at another player, causing as much injury as possible. All of Slytherins' assaults were organized into double attacks.

Harry frantically searched for the snitch, but Draco kept flying right in front of him, making Harry veer off course and take his eyes off the sky. It was an extremely childish behavior, but a successful one. Harry couldn't concentrate on his job, and Draco's tactics (he wasn't even bothering to look for the snitch now) gave the rest of his team more opportunity to score. Slytherin scored three more goals before Draco finally got called on a foul.

"And Madam Hooch calls a skinning foul against Malfoy, for flying directly towards Potter. Luckily Potter manages to avoid the incident, and Gryffindor is awarded a penalty shot, but the damage had been done. Draco's petty flying had given his team the opportunity to drive the score out of Gryffindor's reach. Unless chasers Weasley, McDonald, and Wood can get back on their game, this match is all but over folks."

Connie managed to make the penalty shot, but it still didn't matter. Slytherin had more than a 150 lead on the Gryffindors, and Harry didn't get the feeling that his team was about to make a comeback. Just like Krum did in the Quidditch World Cup match he witnessed, Harry vowed to catch the snitch as soon as possible. Slytherin would still win, but at least Harry would manage to keep Malfoy from catching the snitch, and prevent them from running the score up even higher.

Ten minutes later, with another goal from Connie, but another two from the Slytherins, Harry saw the glint of gold in the corner of his eye. Not bothering with pretense, Harry shot right after it.

"Wait, it looks like Harry Potter's seen the snitch! Yes, Malfoy sees it too, and both seekers fly up towards the Ravenclaw stands, chasing after the small....wait, the snitch takes a sharp turn and is now heading straight for the Slytherin goalposts! Malfoy was so bent on flying fast, he missed the snitch as it flew right under him! He still manages to turn around neatly though, and now he has a twenty foot lead on Potter. With only a dozen yards to the snitch, I don't see how Potter can possibly catch up to Malfoy's Firebolt. I think the end is near, folks!"

Harry didn't think so, though. Malfoy had been stupid enough to miss the snitch as it passed directly under him, and that had given him a chance to catch up. Walter Whigman had promised that his new broom could fly about twenty five mph faster than a Firebolt could, and now Harry was using that extra speed to get closer to Draco. By the time they passed the middle of the field, Harry had cut that distance in half.

"I don't believe it folks! Somehow, don't ask me how, Potter is gaining on Malfoy! That broom he's flying looks like a rotted log, but whatever model it is, it can sure fly! Now closing in on the snitch, Potter is pulling up neck and neck with Malfoy, and the two seem to exchanging some words as the snitch changes course yet again, and is now arcing back up towards to sky."

"Potter, how can you bloody well fly so fast on that ruddy thing?" Draco was screaming out as they pelted after the snitch. Harry had just pulled up along side of the blonde haired boy, and was now starting to overtake him. The look on Malfoy's face, if Harry had chanced to see it, would have been priceless. Malfoy just couldn't believe he was being beaten by Harry Potter yet again, and this time when he was clearly flying what he thought was the superior broom.

Harry heard Draco's comment, but chose not to answer. Doing so would break his concentration, and he needed that snitch. Slytherin was already ahead by twenty points, and they were also currently in possession of the quaffle just underneath him. Harry didn't want to give them any more points.

"Harry Potter now has the lead on Slytherin seeker Draco Malfoy, and is still moving further ahead into the lead! I can't hear what Malfoy is screaming, but whatever it is doesn't look too pleasant. Now a full broom length ahead, Harry Potter....no wait, Malfoy attempts a bladging! He's trying to grab the end of Potter's broom, but Potter just shakes him off. Amazing! What's more, it looks like the attempt moved Malfoy off course, and he's lost precious feet now as he now realigns his broom. It's too late though, folks! Harry Potter has caught the snitch! Slytherin team wins the game, but Potter loses on his own terms by catching the snitch! Final score, 260-280 Slytherin!"



AUTHOR NOTES:

Ok, so that's the latest chapter. As the title promises, a whole lot of Quidditch, and some other stuff. I don't think I'm as good at writing a Quidditch games as other writer's I've read, but I don't think I did too bad of a job. Probably too much detail, like everything else I write, but I'll try to work on that for the next game. I hope this answers some questions you all had, especially about that mysterious Death Eater, and who he was. Not a nice guy, that Sean Hazelton. I hope that I didn't overdo the descriptions of his initiation night, but I wanted to show the Death Eaters for what they really are. This is the first time I'm also taking advantage of my PG-13 rating, so please tell me if you think it's appropriate. And don't tell me that Harry is a pervert for looking through his wall. Any teenage boy out there (and probably most girls too) given the opportunity would do the same exact thing! I can say though, that this chapter is about as graphic as the violence and sexual misconduct in this fic will get. Also, I hope all those shippers out there finally enjoyed some closer Harry/Ginny moments. They're not together yet, but hopefully you can see how I'm forming that relationship. And admit it, when we were all that age, we all loved to give and receive massages from members of the opposite sex. Why, I remember one time at band camp, me and my friends got into a massage train, sitting one behind another, and....well, never mind, you get the idea. We also get to learn more about the released spirits and what will happen to them. Yay!!!! I've been planning this "anti-Dementor" thing for a long time now, and it's another of those "Hedwig becomes a phoenix" ideas I've been coveting. I hope it turns out alright. I also dropped a hint in this chapter as to the reason why Harry is able to cast a golden patronus. Any takers? Let me know if you think you've got the answer. And last but not least, we get to see Seth a little bit more too, after a long sabbatical lasting the last few chapters. No I didn't forget him, he's just a man of very few words. Profound words yes, but very few. That's about it for now, except for one small correction I want to make about the last chapter. I forgot to mention that the Centaur Liason Office, which I shipped Percy Weasley off to, came from Barb LP's trilogy. Now I've been told that the office is actually cannon, and not her original idea, but that it's only mentioned in JKR's book "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find

Them." Since I've never read that book (horror, I know, what type of fan am I?), I'd still like to give credit to Barb for the idea. She used it first after all. So long folks, and don't hate me for making Gryffindor lose its first Quidditch game. It's not the end of the season, you know. Bye!

UPDATE: To avoid the risk of my fic being removed for being too graphic and going beyond a PG-13 rating, I've just cut out more of the Death Eater interrogation that takes place in this chapter. To see the complete, unedited version, please read this chapter as posted in my Yahoo! Group.

Kipkirensky – Yes, Harry is aging faster because of his time traveling. On the train to school he mentions that he just hopes people think of his extra height/weight as a normal growth spurt. Now, instead of being the runt of his year, he's an average size. A member of the yahoo group also pointed this out, which I hadn't thought of. Because the life expectancy of a wizard is more than a muggle, they must age more slowly than we think. After all, Dumble can't really look 150ish and still be powerful, now can he. So naturally, Harry's aging isn't as pronounced.

Coolpadfoot – You're not the first one to complain about my portrayal of Hermione, and all I can say is, I haven't really gotten a chance yet. I have a lot of stuff planned for her after the Xmas holiday, but until then, she's just sort of there. I will try harder to develop her more though. I added a few things around her Bday party this chapter that I thought was interesting. For instance, Herm is the exact type of person I see saving wrapping paper from gifts.

Hg/HrRFan4ever – The joke is this. Ron had just asked Harry if he got caught breaking school rules yet, within the first two weeks of class. This is normally a Hermione thing to say, hence the joke, "Hermione?" Harry was just making fun of Ron's abnormal motherly concerns.

Molly Morrison – Harry wasn't allowed in 6th year Arithmancy because he hadn't passed his OWL in the subject. I think it's a school rule. And he can't take the OWL presently, because they're a standardized test, and I get the feeling they're only administered once

a year. So Harry will just have to suffer for now w/ Ginny, and wait to take the tests at the end of the year. But Vector will catch on eventually.

Perfection Unattainable – In cannon there has never been any mention of other UK schools, so I'm writing under the impression that Hogwarts is the only one. Stan admits to not going to Hogwarts in PoA, but never mentions another school. And I think the size of the Ministry fits well into my projected number of magical people in the UK. If there are 6,000-8,000 of them (which I believe-see Ch. 15 AN for math), then the Ministry could easily employ anywhere from 200-1,000 people. I know that's a high number for normal government, but the MoM must keep the muggles from noticing their world, so I don't see it as improbable. And as we know from cannon, each department is small. Arthur Weasley is only one of two wizards in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Dept, and if Percy can get such a good position in Foreign Affairs right out of school, that leads me to believe that that dept. isn't too large either. And even in cannon, the only magical jobs we hear about are merchants, Ministry personal, professors, Quid players, and a few random others. The job market is severely limited in the magical world, because they have no need for farmers/laborers/etc. That's my two cents.

Tessa & Teazer- I notice that too, but I'm trying to correct. As I've said from the beginning, I'm not a great writer, so please forgive my lack of proper development. I'm doing the best I can, and can only promise to try and get better.

SetsunaFanGirl – Welcome back my very first reviewer! I've been wondering if you were still around. To answer your question, Harry's copy of "Hogwarts: A History" has been hollowed out to hold his time tuner, and he didn't want Hermione to pick up the book, because we all know she would have flipped through it. Harry hasn't told his friends about the time tuner yet, so that's why he got nervous until he realized the book was hidden.

Lynette – I don't think there are any laws concerning transfiguration and/or conjuring, because that's the way I suspect most wizards to work. And no, magical shops wouldn't go bankrupt, because there's no mention in cannon about stores that sell furniture, or anything

simple like that. All magical shops seem to sell enchanted items that have magical properties, and those are impossible to transfigure/conjure. The way I guess, there are limits on transfiguration and conjuring. Wizards can't make money/jewels/precious metals/magical items/living lifeforms/and more complex foods. That's just my idea of how the whole thing works though. Even in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, there's nothing like a furniture department, or a hardware store. I think this is one of the most misunderstood things in all of HP fanfiction. I hate it when I read that Harry decided to eat lunch or dinner at some swank new restaurant in Diagon Alley, or goes to some club. Where in cannon does it ever mention those types of shops?! Sorry, I'm trying to stay true to JKR, and this is one of those things that I think she needs to explain about her world better. Maybe in book 6 or 7? We'll see.

Lauren – The Centaur Liaison Office I imagine is an offshoot of the Ministry for Regulation of Magical Creatures, just like the office to register Animagi is. Of course none of these ideas are cannon, but it's just where I imagine they are. And the whole reason the centaur office was created, was not to make actual attempts at treaties with centaurs, but just to shuffle unwanted Ministry personal

Orion Potter – No, James Potter was a chaser in the books. But for some reason they changed him to a seeker for the movies. I don't know why they did that, and I really hate it.

Samyjoc – Who says Harry automatically would be made captain just because he's the only member of the original Oliver Wood team? There's never been any method supplied in cannon, so I imagine it could work any number of ways. Normally I'd say the team would get to vote on their captain, but this year it was different. With only three returning members, and Ron not eligible, McGonagall decided to ask Harry and Ginny privately in her office.

Harry Potter Jr. – What Harry Potter story would be complete without a Voldemort/Harry confrontation at the end? Of course I'm going to have one!

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I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving 100+ reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit. A link to the site is on my bio page.

## Chapter 18 – Ginny’s Wicked Ways

The Gryffindor Quidditch team, and to a lesser extent Harry, was disappointed with their loss to Slytherin, but at least acknowledged that it could have been far worse. With nearly a complete new team, not to mention the excessive dirty tactics Slytherin had used, a loss by only twenty points was still respectable. The facts that they were still in contention for the Quidditch Cup, and the tremendous humiliation of Malfoy, made the loss even more bearable.

In fact, as soon as Harry had caught the snitch, the entire team got to enjoy a ten minute show of Draco Malfoy at his worst. First he got snubbed by his father (who refused to talk to him after the match), then he whined like a little girl to Madame Hooch about Harry’s unknown broom, claiming that it had illegal charms on it. Them not playing an authorized European Quidditch match, because schoolyard games had no official regulations, didn’t seem to register with him. Then before he finally stormed off the pitch, most of the school, including some from his own house, yelled at him from the stands to stop humiliating himself. It got to the point that even some of the more bold Hufflepuffs were mocking Draco from their elevated positions.

The next day, Sunday, while most of the school caught up with homework, Harry instead spent most of his time in the Room of Requirements planning ways to improve the team’s practices. Ginny had wanted to join in, but the sheer amount of work wouldn’t allow her. The full force of her OWL year schoolwork was finally showing itself. And while Ginny had a head start because of some of her work from the summer, and friends like Harry and Hermione were spending some time helping her with some subjects, she still had more work each week than any other member of the Quidditch team.

The endurance training he had promised Neville and Frank was definitely needed, and Harry figured it couldn’t hurt the chasers either. Harry had a few creative ideas he could work on, besides the obvious running or flying drills. The chasers also needed to spend more time in harm’s way, no matter how much Harry wanted to protect them. Part of the problems that caused Natalie to lose her focus, and Connie to forget her hand signals, was because in practice they

never had such close calls with the bludgers. From now on, Harry vowed the team's practice sessions would be more game-like than just the running drills and scoring opportunities that they had so far used.

As the weekend ended and the week began, Harry had to refocus his attention on his duties besides Quidditch. The weeks before the first game of the season were always lax around Hogwarts, because the students and even most of the teachers looked forward to the highly anticipated action. However, with the first game of the season out of the way now, normal life could continue.

Classes for the most part continued like they had for Harry, with few exceptions. The extra study time done by his double further advanced him in classes, to the point that even Hermione had to make time for extra studying to keep her position as top student in Transfiguration class. As it was, she had long ago given up in Charms, and it was a good thing she wasn't in the same Arithmancy class as Harry. He would have displaced her there as well. At least in Defense Against the Dark Arts, she never had the advantage in the first place.

DADA class was progressing nicely, and most students agreed that Rofordit was the best professor in the subject they had had since Lupin. True, most of her lessons were theory over practical, but the weekly attempt by one of her students to best her in a duel more than made up for any short attention spans.

Over half of the students had by now tried their hand at the duel; some even more than once. Hermione hadn't yet, but Ron had, and he was one of the students who came closest to securing a victory over the elderly instructor. All thought that Harry might finally be the one to gain the fifty house points, but surprising to all, he hadn't yet attempted to duel Professor Rofordit. Even Ron and Hermione tried talking him into it, seeing as how even a failure wouldn't hurt. Harry however was still learning plenty by watching, and saw no reason to get up there himself. True, he also thought he might be one of the few students capable of beating their teacher, but he didn't want to let on how advanced his knowledge was. If he was to duel against Rofordit, he'd be tempted to use some of the advanced spells he'd been

practicing with, and that could lead to an unwanted inquiry from the Headmaster.

Prefect patrols were starting to fall into a common occurrence as well. Harry's nights with Ginny were more fun and adventurous than those with Cami, but both partners were pleasant to be with.

Cami, for her part, got to know Harry beyond "his celebrity image," and found him to be a normal person, who was just often placed in abnormal situations. They talked about many things during their long walks, and after the third week, even breached into more personal topics.

As he explained the inner workings of Gryffindor to shy girl, Harry learned a little about how the Hufflepuff house worked, and was surprised that they weren't as hopeless and easy to pushover as the rest of the school thought they were. They just let the other houses think what they wanted to, and went about their own business. Cami did admit however, that the past year had been hard. Ever since Cedric died (which Harry had to squash guilty feelings about all over again), a braver, older student hadn't yet stepped up to take his spot as a house icon. Gryffindor had Harry and the trio, she explained. Slytherin had Malfoy and his gang of thugs. Even Ravenclaw had Cho, recently Rodger Davies, and the upcoming genius of Terry Boot. So far though, the only student who attempted to show some house pride in Hufflepuff had been Zacharias Smith, and not many students liked him enough to show strong moral support. Hence, Hufflepuff was still struggling in student pride and recognition among all those at Hogwarts.

Harry's nights with Ginny, on the other hand, didn't include any type of depressing thoughts or deeply personal feelings. They left the meaningful stuff for their long talks after Quidditch practice. Instead, their Tuesday night patrols were lighthearted and fun. They most often patrolled the castle dungeon in hopes of catching Slytherins out of bed (that's what Draco and Pansy did, only looking for Gryffindors), made sure to check every broom closet and empty classroom for snogging couples, and even occasionally played pranks on the school caretaker Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris. That had stopped just last week though, when they got caught by McGonagall.

In her animagus form, the Transfiguration teacher had happened across a bit of catnip, which when licked, triggered a clever spell that surrounded the cat with trick steps and false floors. So whereas Mrs. Norris was supposed to fall into the stone floor until morning, McGonagall had triggered the trap instead, and got one hell of a nasty surprise. Even once she transformed back into her human self, it took her almost half an hour to pull herself out of the deep hole. Harry and Ginny had each been docked ten house points for that stunt, and neither had any doubt that they got off lucky because they were both in her house. It was well worth it, however. On the way back to the common room that night, the two joked about what possible reasons their head of house had for pawing around the castle at night, licking strange deposits of catnip. Oh, they theories they came up with!

The only consistencies between the patrol routes with the two different girls were the infrequent meetings with roaming aurors. During the day their presences was almost nil, but at night, there were usually at least four aurors patrolling the castle at all times. So far, Harry had only bumped into Tonks and Kinsley from the Order. He sometimes stopped to chat with them for awhile, but as Cami and Ginny were even less privy to Order information than he was, which was almost none at all, they never did have much to say besides the normal pleasantries.

Dawlish too Harry recognized, but he was much colder to the auror who had accompanied Fudge and tried to capture Dumbledore, than to the other Ministry aurors he passed in the hallways. Dawlish was the first to notice Harry that first meeting, and had tried to nod in recognition to the young man. Harry had simply ignored him. Since then, they had met three more times in the hallways, and Harry still only acknowledged the man with a cold glare. And every time Harry thought he might cut the aspiring auror a break, and return his head nod, all he had to do was remember the night of his Astronomy OWL, when Dawlish and his team attacked not only Hagrid, but Professor McGonagall as well.

Harry's focus turned back to Quidditch however early Wednesday morning, when he and Ginny called an extra practice session with the

team. Up until the Slytherin game, they had all been practicing three times a week. The extra two hour session that Harry and Ginny just agreed to add to their schedule would now make it four. Needless to say, it wasn't a popular decision among the team.

The sun hadn't even risen when Harry inspected his tired and cranky team members on the pitch early that morning. They had all complained, one way or another, about being woken up so early. Ron and Frank had even talking about skiving off practice to get an extra few hours of sleep.

"Quite down; all of you!" Harry demanded. He didn't want to be overly harsh, but the situation called for force. And Ginny and he had long ago decided that when the situation arose, he had to play the bad cop. Ginny was simply no good with discipline, except maybe in the case of her brother. Harry supposed it was her mischievous nature that didn't allow her to punish and criticize others, because she herself caused more trouble than anyone else, now that the twins were gone.

"I know you all don't want to be here, but that's just too bad. I know it's only been a few days, but in case you've forgotten, we lost to Slytherin for the first time in five years last weekend. That's not something I want to happen again. Now, as Ginny and I have said before, we always expected this to be a rebuilding year for our team. And frankly, the way we preformed has already exceeded my expectations for this year's team. I happen to know that Professor McGonagall feels the same way too." There were a few proud faces and quiet cheers now among the tired athletes.

"However," Harry continued, in a warning tone, "those expectations were made before this year's team was decided, and before I could see what you could all do in practice. This team is capable of so much more than what we've done so far, and I don't want to lose another match this season. If we manage to beat both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff this year, there's still a chance we can play a rematch against Slytherin in the finals, and win the Quidditch Cup! So that's my new goal, and I expect all of you to work hard to achieve that. Ginny?"

"Right, I agree with Harry," she said. "Slytherin is going to be the hardest team to play against this season, and we've already seen what they can do. So now that we know our week points, we can work to fix them. Natalie, Connie....the two of you and me need to work more on teamwork. Harry and I have talked, and have come up with some great ideas to improve on that. We've also got to get used to being under fire, so I'm sorry to say that practices are going to get a little rougher for us.

"Philip?" Ginny looked for the seventh year boy, who diligently showed up for every team practice, even though he was only a reserve player. "From now on, Harry and I have decided that you're going to be on the pitch at all times during practices, not just when Frank or Neville need a break. In essence, we're changing the rules of the game to include three beaters, instead of two. There will also be three bludgers in play from now on at all times. Our hopes are that the chasers will be more alert on the field with the added danger, and the beaters will have more work cut out for them with the extra bludger. If all goes as planned, when it comes time to play a real game, and the numbers go back down to two, we should have a leg up on the opposition. The only thing we have to worry about is developing plays and defense strategies that rely heavily on having three beaters. Everyone understand?"

All the players, especially Natalie and Connie, looked a little nervous about the news, but cautiously shook their heads. Only Philip looked excited about the news, as he was now guaranteed equal playing time on the pitch, at least during team practices.

"Ron," Harry picked up where Ginny left off, "you did great the other day, so I don't think we need to improve on your skills much. I got to admit I did get a little concerned when you missed those first two shots, and the Slytherins started singing that blasted song, but things turned out OK. The only thing I can suggest, is if you have the time, take out any students who might want to spend some time flying, and have them shoot quaffles at you. You could even play keeper in a lot of the pick up games with the younger students. I know they're not up to our level of play, but I don't think the extra practice could hurt. It will also get you used to playing in front of others, which I think was your biggest problem last year. After a few weeks of being teased by the

first and second years, which I'm going to tell them to do, I don't think Malfoy and his unoriginal comments will get under your skin so much."

Ron had turned a slight shade of red at having his faults aired in front of the entire team, but nodded that he understood. He honestly didn't expect to get off scott-free in the new Quidditch training regimen. He had, after all, let Slytherin score twenty eight goals against him. The fact that he blocked so many other attempts successfully, in such a long game, didn't lesson the sting any.

"And Neville, Frank, I want you two to meet me in the common room tonight after dinner. That endurance training we talked about is going to be the biggest task for you two to tackle. Now I'm not blaming you, but if we had our beaters at full capacity for the entire game last Saturday, I'm sure the score would have been different, and we would have won the game. We've got to change that by the time we play our next match. Now, Ginny and I have devised some flying drills that will help. The chasers will join in with those as well. And as we've said already, they'll be no more breaks when we substitute in Philip, so being on the pitch the entire time will help also. But I'll show you some independent work tonight that I expect you keep up with. Philip, you're more than welcome to join them, although it's not mandatory, especially as you've got NEWTs this year. The rest of the team is welcome to come also. I expect everyone could benefit from the extra work, if you've got the time and dedication." With a small smile, Harry added, "At the least, you can show up and watch Neville and Frank work their arses off!"

This caused the team to laugh as a whole, even if Neville and Frank's laughs were a bit forced. They didn't know what type of extra work they had in store for them, and Harry's comments hadn't lessened their fears any.

Their fears were unfounded however, as they found out later that night. The whole team had shown up after dinner, which pleased Harry immensely, to find out the extra work he had arranged for the beaters was a workout cycle on muggle gym equipment, set up the day before by Harry with a little help from his house-elves.

Harry had explained his idea to McGonagall immediately after the Slytherin game, and she had quickly agreed. After approval from the Headmaster, McGonagall had added an extra room off the Gryffindor common room one night when everyone was asleep, and Harry had moved in his extra set of gym equipment from home the next day. This included a treadmill, two multi-purpose machines with adjustable weights, jump ropes, a heavy-bag, and a complete set of free weights. His second set of equipment was more advanced than the original machines Harry had bought for his trunk, and it took a full hour to explain to Neville and the others exactly how to work each piece of equipment. So the team could work out whenever they had some free time, the small room was hidden behind a portrait off the common room. And so Harry didn't have to worry about some random Gryffindor abusing the equipment or hurting themselves, the portrait was password protected. Just to make things easy on Neville, they made the password "Mimbulus Mimbletonia," so he wouldn't forget. After the stinky sap had been sprayed all over his face on the Hogwart's Express last year, Harry didn't think he would forget either.

The only restriction on the muggle gym equipment was that little Connie Wood was limited, if she chose to use any of it, to only using the treadmill, jump rope, and heavy bag. She wasn't allowed to use any of the heavier weights, as it could stunt her growth and normal development. While Natalie and Ginny surely still did have a little more to grow in future years, Connie was still pre-pubescent, and as such was more susceptible to developmental changes. Harry had been totally ignorant of the possibility until Professor McGonagall had pointed it out.

Now that he thought about it though, Harry knew what she meant. It was the type of thing that happened to female body builders, or female gymnasts even. Their metabolism was just not equipped to handle such drastic changes, and if forced, their bodies would react harshly. Abnormal levels of hormones, growth stunts, and psychological damage were all possibilities.

After getting over her embarrassment of being referred to as pre-pubescent, Connie had been very upset when hearing about her restriction. But after seeing a conjured picture of a female body builder from Harry, she had no more complaints. And toward the end

of the year, Harry promised to ease her into some light circuit work that would train muscle tone, and not mass. That was enough for her.

And so Quidditch practices began again with a new vigor for the Gryffindor team. Four times a week, for two hours each time, they would all attempt the new and improved schedule that Harry and Ginny had devised. Each practice was much more game-like than previous years, but still had a fair amount of drills and conditioning. Neville and Frank promised to work out in the gym room at least an hour a day, and more if they could find the time. Neither were liking the exercises much, Harry knew, but he also knew that once they got over the initial discomfort of the movements, they'd find things much easier. Having a partner to work with you was invaluable too, as you couldn't skive off a session without disappointing the other. That had been one of Harry's major problems when he first started to work out. Hopefully Frank, Neville, and any others who chose to use the equipment wouldn't have that problem.

In was Wednesday night, after a full day of lessons, a successful meeting of the D.A., and a brutal Quidditch practice, that Harry and Ginny got to enjoy their first massage session of the week. The extra planning and team practices had cut further into the time they normally met.

Ginny's hands worked their magic on Harry's back as he melted into the flat massage table. Weeks ago both teens had gotten past any lingering embarrassment they might have had, and both were now comfortable topless in each other's presence. Well, not totally topless in Ginny's case, but nearly. Her support shirt still covered as much as a muggle bathing suit would, so nothing too improper was going on.

"I think these new strategies are really working well, Harry," Ginny said. "Frank and Neville already seems to last longer in the air, and I think Neville's swing is getting stronger too."

Harry could only moan an agreement in response. Ginny knew what he meant though. There was a distinct difference in the sounds of Harry's positive and negative moans.

"Natalie, Connie and I are working together better too. I think if we continue on at this rate, we might even be able to do away with hand signals all together. I never thought that what you came up with would work, but I'll admit it's very productive. It's even a little bit fun," she added with a giggle.

Harry moaned again, but the corners of his mouth also crept up in a smile that Ginny couldn't see. Ginny had been very vocal against some of Harry's ideas concerning training the chasers, and originally only agreed to give them a trial run. What she didn't know was that his ideas weren't very original at all, but instead were some of the techniques used by muggle athletic coaches, for various sports. Harry had read about them years ago in an abandoned book by Dudley left in his second bedroom.

What Harry had the chasers do, which Ginny had been against at first, was to spend all their meal times together. Not only that, but they were only allowed to talk to others around them, and never with each other directly. They could look at each other, use hand signals, even slap each other around the head if they wished. But they couldn't direct any of their comments to the other girls. To make sure that they complied, Harry made sure to sit right next to them for each and every meal. Ron and Hermione would usually sit to his other side, and the rest of the Quidditch team would sit on the other side of the chasers.

It was Harry's hopes, and the hopes of the insane muggle coaches who had developed this training technique, that by having the girls rely so much on body movement instead of speech when dealing with each other, that they'd get to know their needs and wants better. For instance, if Connie wanted for Ginny to pass the tray of pancakes at breakfast, normally she would need to vocalize her request. Now however, with the new rules in play and Harry's ever watchful eye always present, she'd have to point with her hands, or catch Ginny's eye to try to make her understand what she wanted. If all things went well, and the chasers gave the training a fair chance to work, eventually the coaches in the book Harry had read hypothesized that they wouldn't even need to point or make eye contact. The three chasers would be so attuned to each's needs and wants, that Ginny should be able to pass the platter of pancakes just as Connie was

taking her last bite off her own plate. By not being able to speak, the three would have to learn the eating habits of the others, and would have to study the slightest body movements and gestures. If this practice could be translated to the Quidditch pitch, Harry hoped it would make the three girls a much more cohesive chaser unit. No longer would they have to rely on hard to pick up hand signals and vocal cues. Instead, they would know the others' movements and needs as if they were an extension of their own body. That was the hope, anyway. The three chasers were still a long ways off. Why just yesterday evening, after silently trying to ask Natalie to pass the gravy for over five minutes, Ginny had given up and stood up herself to get it. After applying a little to the turkey on her plate, she then proceeded to empty to full gravy boat on top of Natalie's head, who had been talking with Colin Creevy. Yes, they still needed more work.

"Are the D.A. meetings coming along as well as our Quidditch practices?" Ginny asked, bringing Harry out of his thoughts.

He had to think about that one for awhile, but eventually answered.

"Yes, for the most part. I did expect to be along further this year than the level we are at now, but I think that's due to so many people joining the group. If it was only the members from last year, I know we'd be farther along. Still, I think it's important for as many people to be able to defend themselves properly. Better the whole school have a decent chance against a Death Eater, than just a dozen students having a better than average chance, I think. You've come along nicely, you know. I think I'm starting to see a corporeal form in your patronus even. What do you think it will be?"

Harry only half listened as Ginny went on to theorize what her patronus might be. If she had to make a guess, she thought it would be a crup or something equally as cute. Harry just rolled his eyes. He knew Ginny was half joking, but that was the problem. Her quirky sense of humor would love for her actual patronus to be something unusual and interesting. A crup itself wasn't unusual, but the mental picture of a five pound dog with a forked tail chasing away dozens of Dementors sure was. Even Harry giggled along at the image.

In his advanced D.A. group, about half had been able to conjure a corporeal patronus at least once. Only Harry's stag, Hermione's otter, Cho's swan, and lately surprisingly Neville's lion were the more constant visitors. Each of them could mange an animal form at every attempt. Ron had managed to produce a fox twice, and Susan, Ernie, Terry, Padma, and Seamus had also produced real forms more than once.

None of the newer members to the advanced group could produce a corporeal form yet, but two were well on there way. Orion and Cassiopeia Flint, twin fourth year Slytherins and younger siblings to ex-Slytherin Marcus Flint, had been the most surprising addition to the group, but some of the most potential.

As they admitted to Harry in not so many words, there parents were Death Eaters, and their older brother was well on his way. They however, hadn't ever noticed a difference between Pureblooded wizards and muggle-born, and didn't have the same prejudices that the rest of their family had. They also, thank Merlin, were more attractive and much brighter than their older brother.

Because they always stood by each other's side, and no one wanted to upset Marcus, the twins had been left alone for the most part by their housemates for their entire Hogwarts experience. But with Marcus's graduation, they were now being teased some by the older students, and soon feared that a few scuffles might break out. They had joined the D.A., therefore, to be more able to protect themselves from their housemates. And once they left school, they no doubt would need the skills to refuse the surmounting pressure to join in their parents' activities, which they knew was certain. They didn't want to be Death Eaters, so they had sworn in their second year that they'd learn everything possible to protect themselves later in life.

It had taken awhile for the others to accept the Slytherin duo, especially Ron, but after so many weekly meetings of the D.A., the group had all but forgotten the green colored patch the two had on their robes. They weren't the only Slytherins either. Previously unnoticed students popped out of the woodworks, all claiming to want to protect themselves from their housemates. Harry was amazed, and slightly embarrassed, that he never had noticed the amount of

reluctant students in Slytherin house who didn't agree with some of the older student's ideals. Most were younger students, and none were seventh years, but there was a single sixth year student. Blaise Zabini was the brave loner who joined the D.A. hesitantly the first week, and soon proved her worth and was asked to move up to the advanced group.

Personally, Harry had no problems with Blaise, as she never consortied with Malfoy and his goons willingly. In fact, Harry couldn't remember a single instance in the past five years when she even so much as talked to other sixth year Slytherins, outside of class. And that was even including her own dorm mates, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode.

The large group of first year students that Harry had shown around school that first weekend were also some of the Slytherin members of the D.A. Only seven of the nine had joined, and they were in the novice group of course, but it made Harry feel proud that he might have been a part of the reason why they decided to join in the first place. He'd shown them that not all non-Slytherins were bad before house prejudices could set in, and for the most part it had worked. Sadly, Loren Zabini was one of the two first years who hadn't joined. Blaise later explained to Harry that once her parents noticed her less than enthusiastic attitude about ridding the world of muggles and half-breeds, they had redoubled their efforts in convincing their youngest child. Not everyone could be saved, Harry realized.

Even Professor Dumbledore had noticed most of the young students' attitudes, and had made a comment to Harry one night in the hallways, after dinner had concluded. "That is the most social and friendly bunch of Slytherins I've seen in many years, Harry. I heard about your little tour, of course, and I have no doubt that you had a large part to play in their attitude. Job well done," he had said.

Harry could only mumble a thank you. He mumbled again as he returned from his thoughts, as the extreme pleasure continued thanks to Ginny's ministrations.

"What was that, Harry? Honestly, you're worse than Ron with a mouthful of food!"

"I said, that feels wonderful. I don't think you've ever done that before, but I like it." Harry was commenting on Ginny's current actions, which were her hands kneading the sides of his torso and abdomens. Over the past weeks, their hands had roamed some from just the shoulders and back area, which is what both teens started with in their massages. Not roamed to any naughty places, Harry thought with a blush, but just to some more areas that got sore while playing Quidditch. Ginny had worked her way down Harry's back, and moved her hands to either side of his stomach. His oblique abs, which were a little pronounced from all his exercise, often got sore from all the twisting motions Harry made while riding his broomstick. Ginny was rubbing a slave into them presently that would relax his muscles' tension. It was something Harry had brewed himself, and smelled strongly of mint. It was a good thing however, that her hands never traveled below his hips, otherwise no salve would be able to relieve that muscle tension. Harry had long since tried to stop his body's reactions to the wonderful massages he received. It wasn't anything sexual, he knew, it was just in response to the pleasant stimuli. He was sure, however, to hide any embarrassing signs from Ginny, if he had to get up in a state of arousal. When that happened, he always made sure to leave the table facing away from her, and then put his robes back on.

"Well," Ginny giggled as she applied more pressure, "you'll have to show me how good it feels. I think I'm about done. My turn!"

In her excitement, Ginny slapped Harry's bum jokingly and roughly pushed him off the table. The pain of landing on the hard cold ground, and the shock of the sudden movement, put Harry's fears to rest that he might have to deal with an embarrassing situation. He was completely in control by the time he regained his footing, and Ginny was already lying on her stomach, with her face in the padded hole the table provided.

"Pay special attention to my shoulders today, I think I might have overdone it a bit with the passing drills."

"Yes, your highness!" Harry joked, as he reached across the table for some of the oils and lotions they normally used. The two had a few

favorites, and the Room of Requirements always provided at least one new choice each time they met. Rubbing today's coconut scented oil between his palms to warm it, Harry asked some of his own questions.

"So, how's your workload coming along this year? OWL's getting to you yet?"

Ginny nodded her head as Harry began rubbing the junction of her neck and shoulders. It was the place he always started his massages, as it always seemed safe. With strong, slow stokes, he gently squeezed and kneaded his hands.

"It's not as bad as some of the others, I don't think," Ginny elaborated. "I know my dorm mates spend more time with homework than I do, and Luna says the same thing about hers'. Not that she spends a lot of time with them, mind you, but at least they stopped stealing her things this year."

Harry didn't know that to be true, but was glad. Earlier in the year he had talked to Padma and Cho about Luna's belongings being taken every year by her housemates, and had asked them to try and look out for his friend. They said they'd do what they could, and apparently it was working.

"We really do owe you and Hermione a lot for working with us so much. I know I got some advanced work done this summer because of looking at Ron's homework, but you two really are the reason I'm so ahead in my studies. I don't know how you find the time."

"Don't forget about Neville," Harry reminded her. "He's been helping you both with Herbology in the greenhouses. Hermione and I can't take all the credit." Twice a week Harry and Hermione met with the two fifth years to go over any concepts or work they had questions about. Hermione usually concentrated on Transfiguration, Arithmancy, History, and Potions, while Harry specialized in DADA, Charms, and CoMC. Neville addressed their Herbology concerns at a separate time each week. Harry had taken to giving Ginny a little extra help alone too sometimes when they both had nothing else to do. He

would have done the dame with Luna, except with her being in a different house, it was harder to arrange times and places to meet. Usually his meetings with Ginny were at night in the common room, after one of them lost a game of chess to Ron, or something similar.

“Ohhhh, that’s nice,” Ginny mentioned of Harry’s current actions. He had moved from her neck and shoulders to just her neck, and was now rubbing the oil into the base of her skull, above her hairline. Oddly, it was the same place that Sean Hazelton had a Dark Mark burnt into his flesh.

Shaking the sickly feelings in his stomach at remembering some of his captured Death Eater’s crimes, Harry continued in his work, now moving his hands to either side of Ginny’s neck. The area around her throat, and behind her ears, all got their just due, and were paid special attention before Harry moved on. Hands creeping lower, Harry continued down the line of her spine, past the middle of her back, to the waistline of her pants. The cooler weather in the air caused both teens to wear pants now instead of shorts during team practices, but Harry didn’t notice. He forced himself never to look past Ginny’s waistline, because regardless of whether she was wearing pants or shorts, the material was always stretched tightly across her bum as she laid on the table. Instead, Harry dug his thumbs into the slight depression in the small of her back, and used his fingers to grab onto her hips to get better leverage.

“Ron feels a little left out, you know, not being able to tutor me in any subject. He offered to teach some Divination, but I had to remind him that I don’t take the subject.” It amazed Harry that Ginny had no trouble stringing together coherent sentences while he worked on her. In her position, Harry at best could only use single syllable words to answer any questions.

“I think Ron will get over it,” Harry replied. “He may say differently, but we both know if he had to spend extra time on school work that wasn’t even his, he’d do nothing but complain. Besides, Ron’s got other things on his mind now. Let’s just say it’s a good thing you don’t have Dean helping you study. I don’t think Ron would like to see the two of you alone, no matter the excuse. He still thinks the two of you are dating, you know.”

Ginny laughed. "Really? Boy, my brother really is thick sometimes, isn't he? Dean and I have hardly spent any time alone together. I'm always busy with the Quidditch team these days."

"That's the reason why Ron's still suspicious," Harry informed her. "Ron thinks because he doesn't see the two of you spending a lot of time together, that you must be sneaking around at night. I even caught Ron once trying to break into my trunk to get at the Marauder's Map and my invisibility cloak. I think he was going to try to spy on the two of you."

Ginny was angry at hearing that. Even though she had nothing to worry about, she was mad that Ron would feel the need to spy on her. To calm the fiery redhead down some, Harry moved his attention to massaging Ginny's shoulder blades just underneath her armpits. He knew this was her one weak spot, and would head off her tirade before it began. Positioning his thumbs behind the large bones of her shoulder blades, Harry worked his fingers into her sides. To his surprise, Harry found that the support shirt she wore that day ended right where his fingers landed. The material stopped just under her arms, and only the three thin straps continued across her back. Harry was slightly tempted to push his fingers under the material of the sides of her support shirt to get better access to her ribcage, but decided against it. The area was too close to other parts of Ginny that Harry didn't want to think about, and he figured the area was covered by her support shirt for a reason.

To distract his mind, Harry thought back to the night he had caught Ron attempting to break into his trunk. It was the night after the Quidditch game, and Harry had just got back from the owlery, after sending his first report letter to Walt Whiggman about his new broom's performance, when he entered his dorm room to find Ron kneeling before Harry's trunk. He had a letter opener in his hands, and was trying to pry the halves of the trunk apart.

"What do you think you're doing?" Harry demanded. If truth be told, he was a little angry that Ron would invade his personal space like this. He wasn't worried about Ron actually opening the trunk and discovering his many secrets, but Harry was hurt and disappointed

that not only would Ron attempt to gain entrance without Harry's permission, but he'd also resort to trying to break open the trunk's seal. The trunk had belonged to his grandfather, and was one of the only family belongings Harry owned. What made it worse, was that Ron knew that as well, and was still trying to use the envelope opener like a crowbar.

"Trying to get at your map and cloak." Ron didn't even bother to look Harry's way, and had the gall to continue trying to pry open his trunk. Harry actually had to cross the room to pull his friend away before Ron stopped.

"What the bloody hell do you expect to achieve with a letter opener? I told you about all the security precautions built into this trunk. The worse you can hope to do is mare the finish, you sodding git! If you want to borrow something from me you need to ask, not take it without my permission."

"Gee, sorry! No need to get tetchy about it. Can I borrow your invisibility cloak and map, then? There's something I want to check on." Ron still didn't look even the least bit ashamed.

'What do you want to use them for?' Harry asked.

"Ginny is up to no good with Dean. I just know it! Problem is, I can never catch them at anything, so I can't write home about it. I need to find where the two of them meet up, so I want to use your cloak to sneak up on them. Come on now, open the trunk! I saw Ginny leaving the common room ten minutes ago, and Dean's nowhere to be found. He better not lay a finger on my baby sister!"

Harry didn't know what to do, but for some reason, maybe because of his anger at catching Ron trying to invade his privacy, he purposely refused the offer.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no, Ron," Harry explained. "It's my cloak and my map, and right now I don't want to lend them to you. Besides, what Ginny and Dean do with their own time is none of your business. I've got locks

on my trunk for a reason, and if I wanted you to be able to get in there whenever you wanted, I would have left it open.”

“But how else was I supposed to get in?” Ron threw his hands up in annoyance. “You were no where to be found, and you forgot to key me into the security thingy when you showed all of us your trunk’s features.”

From there the conversation got even worse. Ron had expected to have free access to Harry’s things, and when Harry admitted that he didn’t forget to key Ron in, but purposely didn’t do it, Ron got even angrier. He accused Harry of hiding things from his best mate, and had brought up the fact that they weren’t spending as much time together this year as normal, with the exceptions of classes and Quidditch practice.

Harry knew that Ron was right, about not spending enough time with him at least, but was too angry to admit it. Besides, Ron was not right about the rest. Harry had very good reasons to keep the trunk to himself, even if he couldn’t tell Ron what those reasons were.

That night at dinner, and the rest of the evening, Ron and Harry continued to be cold towards each other. They made up at breakfast the next day though, over one of their famous bacon strip eating contests encouraged by Hermione. She had noticed the tension between the two, and had thought of an excellent way for the two hot-headed friends to make up. Harry only managed to eat seventeen that day, but Ron had gone on strong to eat a record breaking forty two strips! After an impressive victory like that, Harry had to congratulate Ron, and apologize for overreacting the previous day. Ron accepted the apology, and offered one of his own. He said all the right things, and had no doubt been coached by Hermione on what to say. By lunch, they were both back to best friends. It was a good thing too, as Harry had to escort Ron to the Hospital Wing for not feeling too well. The only thing that hadn’t been resolved was Ron’s access to Harry’s trunk.

“We should play a prank on him, you know, to teach him to mind his own business.” Ginny’s comment brought Harry back to the present,

and he moved his hands back up to Ginny's shoulders now. They were the area she was most concerned about after all.

"Like what?" Harry asked. Despite the fact that the infamous Prongs was his father, Harry really didn't think the same way Ginny, the twins, or the Marauders did. He had more important things on his mind; like Voldemort. He'd been very quite lately, and Harry hadn't had a vision in over a month.

"I'm not sure," Ginny answered. "I need to think about it. It's got to be something that will teach him a lesson, but at the same time makes him see that he's overreacting about this whole 'big-brother' routine. Dean and I may not be doing anything, but some day I will be, and Ron's got to accept that he can't control my actions. Speaking of which, we should really let poor Dean off the hook with Ron as well. I think their friendship's starting to suffer over this. Dean's only pretending to be my boyfriend because I asked him to. He really doesn't like lying to Ron though. Maybe we can include this in the prank?"

Harry was now squeezing Ginny's upper arms, from her elbows to her shoulders, and then back again. He'd had to apply more oil awhile ago, so his hands were plenty lubricated. With her arms stretched out over her head on the table, Harry had no problems accessing all of Ginny's nooks and crannies.

"Maybe you can pretend to get another boyfriend, to let Dean off the hook? I'm sure Neville or someone else wouldn't mind pretending for awhile."

"Nahh, that wouldn't work. Ron knows we're only friends now, and I wouldn't want to lead Neville on any, even if it was only pretend." Ginny paused to ponder. With an evil grin Harry couldn't see, she calmly offered another suggestion.

"We could always tell Ron that you and I are together? We could even tell him all about these sessions we've been having. I'm sure Ron would completely understand all the massage oils and everything."

Harry's hands froze on her back until he realized she was just kidding. It took a moment, but Ginny's uncontrollable laughter broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Why you little..." Harry was pretending to chock Ginny's neck now, even though he couldn't get a proper hold with his slippery hands.

"Hehehe, you're so easy to get sometimes, Harry. It's a wonder you catch on to any of my jokes!"

Harry thought it was funny too, but pretended to be outraged and hurt. When Ginny continued to giggle, Harry grabbed the closest bottle of oil he could find, and squeezed a generous portion all over her back. Not being warmed up between his hands, it was shockingly cold, and caused Ginny to shriek with surprise, as she wiggled around on the table uncomfortably.

"Ahhhh, that was evil Harry Potter! You'll pay for that. Don't think I'll forget, either. I'll get you back when you least expect it!" Harry's face was red from laughing so hard, and his eyes filled with mirth at the look on Ginny's face. She was sitting on the table properly now, the massage completely forgotten after she got doused with cold oil.

"I know! That give me an idea of how we can prank Ron!" Ginny clapped her hands together. Harry didn't know what she was talking about, so he asked.

"You're face Harry; it's all red. It reminded me of that one time Fred gave Katie Bell all those hickies and love bites. Her whole neck was red for days. Ron would just go bonkers if he found me with those same marks. And I know he'd confront me about them, and blame Dean. I can simply tell Ron that Dean had nothing to do with them, and that we broke up weeks ago. It's perfect!"

"Errr, Ginny? You're forgetting one thing." Harry thought the fault in the plan was obvious. "You don't have hickies or any other kind of marks on your neck. The plan kind of centers around that. And I'm not sure Dean would be willing to incur Ron's wrath much farther. That might be asking too much of him."

Ginny giggled again. "No, not Dean, silly. That's where you come in. Ron would never expect it from you, and seeing as how you're already here, we might as well act on this tonight. If I hurry, I can just get off a letter to put phase two of my plan in action."

Harry didn't hear anything about phase two however, because he was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that he'd have to give Ginny the love bites her plan demanded. But that meant that....

"Ginny! I can't do that! I'd have to suck on your neck to make hickies, and I'm pretty sure Ron would kill me if he ever found out!"

Ginny was positively bouncing now with an odd mix of anticipation, excitement, and humor. The thought of having Harry kiss and nibble on her neck had crossed her mind, and the thoughts were quite nice, but she was more excited about the reaction Ron would show.

"Don't worry Harry, I don't mind. Besides, it's not like it will mean anything. It'll only take a few moments, and no one ever has to know that you did it. I promise. Just think of the reaction it will get from Ron, though. This will be priceless! I can have Colin take some picture of Ron even, and send them to Fred and George. They'll be so proud of me. Please Harry? I won't bite....that'll be your job." Ginny went into another fit of giggles when she realized what she said.

There was a very short list of things he'd rather do than to kiss Ginny on the neck. She was, after all, a very attractive girl. Harry would have to be blind not to notice, especially after spending so much time alone with her these past few months. Still, just that fact that he wanted to go through with this, was reason enough to convince him that he shouldn't. He might get carried away, or do it wrong, or any number of things. No, this was definitely a bad idea.

Seeming to read his mind, Ginny reached out to grab his hands, and she pulled Harry in to stand right in front of her. She was still sitting on the edge of the massage table, and now Harry was standing in between her legs, bashfully looking away.

"Come on Harry, just pretend that I'm someone else. Someone who sends you pink colored letters every week, perhaps?"

Harry's eyes shot to Ginny when she said that. "How do you know?" He thought he'd kept his relationship with Amber secret, even from his closets friends. It's not that he was embarrassed or anything. Harry just liked having something that was just his. Something that his friends didn't know about.

"I don't really. But it's not hard to figure out. Really, Harry. Pink letters? If you were trying to keep it a secret, you should have been more careful about things. Only a girl would write on pink parchment, and she'd only use it to write love letters. Plus the fact that not a week goes by that you don't receive one, and it's not hard to deduce. What's her name?"

"Her name's Amber, and they're not love letters. We're just pen pals, sort of."

Sort of indeed. Ginny almost laughed, but instead asked more about her.

"We meet this summer at Madam Malkin's robe shop. She works there, and she helped me pick out my new robes this year. When we were done that day, she asked if she could see me again, but I had to say no. I tried explaining to her that I wasn't allowed to just go about town like normal. And even if I could, I wouldn't want to, with reporters and fans following me everywhere. She seemed to understand, but only after I promised I'd come see her again if I was ever near Diagon Alley again. I did meet her once more, and we had lunch in muggle London together, but that was the last time I've seen her. We both promised to write each other, though, and that's what we've been doing."

"So she spent hours dressing you the first time you met, and the second time was out on a date? Sounds to me like a lady friend, Harry," Ginny teased. "Did you kiss her?"

What!!! Harry couldn't believe Ginny had been forward enough to ask that, and couldn't form the words to answer. He didn't have to though, as his blush answered Ginny's question for her.

"Ohhhh," she squealed, "you did! See, it's not that hard. Just pretend I'm her for a moment. All you have to do is kiss and suck on my neck, after all. It's not like we're snogging or anything."

"I don't even know how to do this," Harry mumbled.

"What?" Ginny hadn't heard what he said, and asked him to repeat himself. So he did.

"Really? I thought you and Cho did this type of thing last year. What about Lavender and Pavarti? They're always going on about how good of a kisser you are."

Now it was Harry's turn to shoot up an eyebrow and ask Ginny to repeat herself.

"Lavender and Pavarti? I've never kissed them! What on earth are they talking about? I think once we're done getting even with Ron, we might have to play a joke or two on those airheads."

"Don't get off the subject. Although it does make sense now; that those two never talked about you when Hermione was around. They only brag about you to the younger girls. Anyway, just kiss and nibble on my neck a little. There's really not a way to do this wrong. And as long as you don't draw blood, I'm sure I won't complain."

Harry backed off a bit by Ginny's candor, and she had to pull him back in. She still had a grip on both his hands. "Really, Harry. You're too easy to scare, and it's too much fun. If only You-Know-Who knew how scared you were of intimacy, maybe he'd try to kiss you to death."

"That's not funny," Harry growled. It was though, sort of. Especially since Harry wasn't sure if Voldemort even had lips. If he did, they were way thinner than even McGonagall's.

"Oh shut up already and suck on my neck! Remember; think of Amber. And don't stop until you get some good marks on there either, or we'll have to do this all over again."

Harry thought again of backing out, but the strong grip Ginny had on Harry's hands wouldn't allow him to escape. Besides, it would be funny to see Ron's reaction. And kissing Ginny, even if it was only on the neck, wouldn't be too bad either. Maybe Harry wouldn't even need to spy on the seventh year girls tonight with his x-ray lens. So taking a deep breath, and closing his eyes so he didn't see the look on Ginny's face, Harry pushed his mouth forward to the crook of her throat, and opened his mouth when he felt skin.

At first all he did was get an air-tight seal on her skin, and create a vacuum. He had heard once that that's how hickies formed; suction broke capillaries in the skin that caused discoloration. But Harry wasn't sure, so after a few seconds, which seemed like hours, he started to move some. Merlin, he wished Hermione was here. Not that he needed another female present (the thought caused a deeper blush that was already on his face), but because she'd be able to tell him the best way to go about marking Ginny. Hermione no doubt had read up on the subject.

Moving his mouth a little higher, Harry started to close his mouth some, and let the air-tight seal break. When it did, he hesitantly pushed his tongue onto Ginny's skin, and began to move it in small circles. Surprised by the coconut taste of the oil he'd applied himself, Harry became more confident in his strokes as he lapped up the tasty skin.

In the back of his head Harry thought he might have heard Ginny make a sigh, but he convinced himself that he'd heard wrong. She was just probably just giggling at his attempt. Strangely not discouraged by this, Harry continued his exploration, and licked at the tender flesh right below Ginny's earlobe. He flicked it experimentally, and found that he liked the odd shape of Ginny's ear. He sucked on it for a moment before winding his trail back down. Harry wasn't convinced he had caused enough marks on Ginny's neck, and there was a lot more space to explore.

Sometime later, more than a minute, but less than five, Harry realized his hands, which were previously flat on the table to either side of Ginny, were now resting gently on her hips. He didn't remember

moving his hands there, but honestly, his attention was placed elsewhere. He had really enjoyed himself.

Stunned by his lack of control, Harry pulled away quickly. A thin saliva thread linked his now closed mouth with Ginny's red neck, and Harry was embarrassed that she might see his slobber. Not thinking clearly, Harry went in for a last lick to clean up his mess. Ginny was surprised by the move (she had opened her eyes as Harry's mouth first left her skin), and let out a short sound. Harry didn't know if it was a moan or a sign, but this time it was most definitely not a giggle.

The silence now broken, and with both teen's attention on Harry's hands on Ginny's hips, the two sprung apart fast enough to topple the massage table. Neither noticed though, as Harry busily collected his training gear, and Ginny threw on some robes, noticing for the first time since they began these massages how exposed her outfit really made her.

"Well, umm, I certainly think that's enough," Ginny got out nervously. "I don't have a mirror handy, but I'm sure you left some pretty decent marks. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast then?"

Harry, who didn't notice the mirror springing into existence behind Ginny, agreed quickly. "Breakfast, yes. See you then. Goodnight Ginny."

And so the two retired to their separate dorms. Even though the walk from the Room of Requirement to the Gryffindor common room was the same for each, somehow they managed two different routes, so they wouldn't have to walk together. Once tucked in for bed, each teen knew they were in for a sleepless night, too busy worrying about the other's reaction to what they had just done.

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The next morning at breakfast, Harry did all he could to avoid sitting near Ginny. Unfortunately, the whole house was used to his sitting arrangement to sit near the chasers to oversee their non-verbal meal, so the only group of open seats were the usual. Harry might have

been able to find room next to the first years near the end of the table, but that would have appeared too odd.

Ginny was already eating when he sat down, and Harry was happy that he at least had some time with her alone to get past any strange tension before Ron showed up. Since Harry didn't rely on the tower showers, he usually beat Ron down in the mornings. It was a good thing too, because judging by the red marks on Ginny's neck, Ron would throw one hell of a fit.

As if she knew what he was thinking, Ginny chose that moment to speak for the first time. If she still felt at all embarrassed or funny about their little act the day before, her face showed no sign.

"Some marks I got, huh Harry?" Ginny asked with a suggestive smile. Some of the girls near her giggled as they couldn't help but overhear, and Harry could only hope that Ginny kept her promise of not telling anyone that he caused them.

"Let's just wait and see what Ron thinks of them. It's his opinion that matters, now isn't it?" Harry was very proud of the poker face he wore. Inside though, he was still remembering her coconut flavored skin.

"Oh, by the way, do you think Hedwig could deliver a message for me later today? Possibly after breakfast? I meant to send an owl out last night, but I forgot." Harry could have sworn he saw her face turn an extra shade of pink. It was hard to tell though, with all the hickies she wore. "Now I'm afraid it won't arrive on time if I still use an owl."

Harry wondered what Ginny needed to send such a fast message for, but didn't have time to ask. "Sure, but remind me later. Here comes Ron! I don't really know what you plan on telling him, so please leave me out of whatever story you concoct. I'd hate to be the guy who Ron blames for all this!"

True enough, Ron was heading down the isle, with Hermione right behind him. As she was usually up early in the morning studying in the common room, she always waited for whoever took the longest to get ready, and escorted them to breakfast. This past year, it was mostly Ron.

Ron greeted his friends good morning like normal, and then proceeded to load his plate with kippers, eggs, waffles, bacon, and muffins. If history served to repeat itself, it was only the first of at least three breakfast plates he would make for himself.

So far he hadn't even looked up to face his sister or Harry, and instead was trying to hold a conversation with his face planted in his plate. Ron's theory was, the closer your mouth was to the food, the more you could eat in any given time. Luckily, Hermione had better table manners, and therefore noticed Ginny's indiscretion for those who hadn't yet.

"Ginny, where on earth did those come from? You've been snogging! I hope you weren't in the Astronomy tower last night! That's against school rules."

"Wha...?" Ron couldn't form the full word because of his mouthful of potatoes, but when he looked up to see what Hermione was talking about, he swallowed real fast and lashed out with his Weasley temper.

"Ginny, did Dean do that? I'm going to kill him! Oy, Dean, what do you think you're doing with my baby sister?"

Dean, who was sitting on the other end of the table, had been warned already that Ginny had a joke to play on Ron, so he wasn't worried like he'd normally be. He was also relieved that Ginny promised he wouldn't have to pretend anymore to Ron to be interested in his sister.

"Chill Ron, it wasn't me mate. When I mark my women, I make sure to do it where no one sees."

Ron's eyes bulged out as he looked back to Ginny. "He better have not marked you anywhere where I can't see! What do you think you're on about, Ginny? Wait till Mum hears about this!"

"Ron," Ginny admonished. She had taken a tone that showed only mild interest and annoyance. "Dean just said that he didn't do anything. If you're referring to the hickies on my neck, I'm sorry you

had to see them. But I've run out of the special make-up that covers them up. And Dean and I broke up weeks ago, if you'd only care to notice. I think he's interested in Pavarti now."

"Well, then who have you been snogging with? And where has this been happening? I demand to know!"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, you demand do you? Well fine, I'll tell you. I was in one of the broom closets on the second floor last night after dinner, and who I kiss is none of your business. You're just jealous that I've got someone!"

Ron was outraged. "Jealous? As if! At least I'm not running around school, snogging every boy I see! You still haven't told me who you've been seeing, though. As your brother, I think I have the right to know who your new boyfriend is!"

"I don't have a new boyfriend. What are you talking about?" Only Harry, because his head wasn't pounding with rage and surprise, could tell that silently Ginny was loving every minute of this. She must have planned out every detail of what she was going to say the night before. Hermione had caught on too by now. Smart one, that witch was. Harry and her shared a small conspiratory smile before turning their attention back to Ron.

Ron's anger was momentarily interrupted by his confusion at Ginny's confession. "What do you mean you don't have a boyfriend? Who have you been kissing then?"

Ginny waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, I don't know. Whoever pulled me into that broom closet, I suppose. He was a good kisser though. I should have gotten his name before I left, but I did see that his robe's house patch was either blue or green. So I guess it was someone in either Ravenclaw or Slytherin."

"Oh Hell," Harry thought. Ginny had just said the magic word. He was trying desperately now to hold in his laughter, as was Hermione and a few others. Ron didn't seem to notice though. He had other things on his mind.

"SLYTHERIN! What in bloody hell do you think you're doing with a Slytherin! And you don't even know who it was? It could have been Malfoy, for all you know! You're turning into a Scarlet Woman, Ginny! Wait till Mum hears about this!"

At Ron's outburst, the whole hall had turned their attention to the sibling argument, and for the first time Harry thought they might have taken this prank a little too far. He'd had no idea that Ginny was going to say so much. He only thought that she'd make a joke about a new boyfriend, and then immediately let Ron in on the scheme once he started to fume. But Harry knew things were way out of control now, because McGonagall was stalking her way from the staff table with a tight lipped frown on her face, and she certainly wasn't here to award points.

"Mr. Weasley. You will kindly refrain from making remarks like that about the other school houses. That will be fifteen points from Gryffindor. Now please stop shouting and return to your breakfast."

"But, but..." Ron could only stutter. Still overwhelmed by Ginny's confession, he couldn't string any words together.

"But nothing. That will be quite enough out of you, or else you'll be serving a detention with Professor Snape tonight." Whoa, McGonagall must be really brassed off if she was threatening one of her own students with a detention with Snape. Then again, Ron did embarrass his whole house by his outburst.

Ron knew at least to keep his mouth shut, but he shot some death glares at Ginny until Professor McGonagall walked away. Once she did, Ron gave one more dirty look, and then picked up his things and stalked out of the room. Once the Great Hall doors closed, Harry and Hermione burst out laughing, and Ginny joined in with them. All the tension from the day before was forgotten in light of Ron's explosion.

"Ginny, I think you might have taken things too far," Harry managed to say through his laughter.

She responded, "Well, I never meant for him to lose any house points, but he should have known better than to erupt like that in front of the

staff. I honestly thought he'd wait until we got back into the common room. Still, my plan's not complete yet. There's still phase two."

"Phase two?" Hermione asked. "I'm still waiting to hear what phase one was about."

So Ginny and Harry quickly filled her in. They said nothing about who Ginny had actually gotten intimate with to receive her be speckled appearance, but Hermione had picked up on the odd vibe between them in the early parts of the meal. Wisely though, she said nothing. If Harry and Ginny wanted her to know something else, they'd tell her.

"Hermione," Harry asked out of the blue. The three had returned to finish their meals, and Ginny had just passed a platter of hash brown to Connie. Even during her tale told to Ron, Ginny had paid a little attention to her fellow chasers. A lack of concentration could result with a maple syrup bath, she knew quite well. "Is that a new necklace? I don't think I've seen it before. It's quite nice."

Now it was Hermione's turn to blush and look flustered. Her robe must of fallen open part way when she was laughing so hard, and her necklace had slipped out from underneath.

"Told you he'd notice eventually," Ginny said. The two swapped a short giggle and then Hermione explained.

"It was a birthday present from Victor. You didn't think I only got presents from you guys and my parents, now did you? He wrote that it's a Bulgarian custom to exchange birthstone with friends, so he sent this nice Sapphire pendant in his last letter. It's lovely, isn't it."

Indeed it was, and Harry couldn't believe he had missed it in more than the month that had passed since Hermione's birthday. The stone itself wasn't cut in any particular shape, but rather left in its raw form. It was highly polished though, and a delicate gold chain was attached that was just long enough to keep the necklace from being hidden from under Hermione's shirt. Actually, the pendant drew attention to the V-shape of her blouse, and rested nicely in the swell of her chest. Harry dared not think about it any further. That damn x-ray charm

was more trouble than it was worth! The things his mind thought of these days!

“Victor, huh? I didn’t know that you two were still writing. Why haven’t you told us about this before?”

Ginny answered for Hermione this time. She must have still been upset at Ron, because she wasn’t pulling any punches with her answer.

“Well, I knew about it of course, as did Lavender and Pavarti. A few others, I suspect as well. But we didn’t tell you and Ron about it, because if you hadn’t noticed, my prat of a brother gets insanely jealous whenever a certain Bulgarian seeker’s name gets mentioned.”

Hermione had blushed a little at Ginny’s explanation, and felt she needed to clarify. “Victor and I are just friends, if you must know. I did visit him a few days this summer, but things were kept strictly platonic. However, I get the feeling he wants more, and judging by the expensive necklace, I think I’m right. I’m going to try and let him down easily, but it might take some time. I’m just not ready for any type of long-distance relationship. I haven’t even had a short-distance one yet. Ron however, sees red every time Victor’s name is mentioned, and I don’t think he’d understand. So if you don’t mind Harry, please don’t tell Ron any of this. Give me some time to write Victor and work this out. Oh, he told me to tell you he thinks Rowen is a fine specimen. He congratulates you on picking him out.” Hermione paused to giggle, “I think he’s a little jealous that you picked out such a practical gift, when he himself went a little overboard.”

It took a moment for Harry to process all that he had been told, but got it after awhile. Ron could get mighty jealous, and it seemed that Hermione and Ginny were both somewhat aware of Ron’s crush on Hermione. Harry wondered though if they knew how long it had gone on for. Harry wondered if Ron even knew how far back the attraction had gone. Harry himself guessed at least back to the beginning of their fourth year.

"Tell Victor I said hi, next time you write. Tell him to look for a new broom on the market soon too, by Walt Whiggman. He won't want to pass up that opportunity." Harry couldn't think of much more to say.

Hermione nodded, and though it nice to warn a fellow seeker about the new, upcoming broom. Victor, she figured, might be one of the few people she knew who could appreciate it's increased performance over the Firebolt. On a person like Malfoy, the subtle difference would be lost. Just because Hermione couldn't fly to save her life, doesn't mean she's not knowledgeable about the sport, after all. She was friends with Ron, Ginny, and Harry, who were all obsessed with the game. She'd picked up a few facts over the years.

"Now Ginny, what's this about phase two?"

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Phase two, as both Hermione and Harry found out the next day, occurred when Ron received a letter from his Mum. The day before, he had written home the moment he had stormed out of the Great Hall, and had then spent the day ignoring the lot of them. He wasn't actually mad at Harry or Hermione, he was just too frustrated to enjoy any of his free time. He'd turned in early the night before, and Harry could hear him tossing and turning in bed well into the night.

Ginny made sure to look over to Ron as he read the letter, but made it appear as if she wasn't interested. Harry and Hermione, who had both been informed of what phase two consisted of, made sure they had good seats for viewing. The show was about to begin.

Ron's eyebrows crawled up on his forehead as he finished the letter, and he threw it down in disgust. Looking over to Ginny, he spat out, "Mum says hi, and asks how you're doing in your OWL year!" With that, he strode out of the room once more, cursing his own family under his breath. "Mental, the whole lot of them!"

The second he left, Harry grabbed the letter before anyone else could, and read it aloud for those who were in on the joke. By now, the entire Quidditch team, Ginny's dorm mates, Dean, Lavender, and Pavarti were all apprised on the situation.

Dear Ron,

You should be ashamed of scolding your sister in public like that. As far as I can tell, she's done nothing wrong. You yourself admitted that you only saw kiss and bite marks on Ginny's neck, and that hardly

constitutes being a Scarlet Woman. She'd have to do a lot more than just some snogging to earn that title. And for your information, it's not that uncommon for teenage couples to be snogging in broom closets!

Why, I can tell you stories about when your father and I were at school! In fact, I think we even used that same closet on the second floor you wrote about. An animal, your father used to be! Anyway, back to the subject.

Honestly, I don't think you know how hard it is to be a teenage girl. Especially coming from our family, Ginny's got to work every advantage

she can use to snag a man who might want to marry her. We can't afford her beautiful clothes or fancy smelling perfumes, so if Ginny's got to give a little TLC to get boys interested, than that's just fine with me.

So please refrain from interfering in Ginny's love life, unless you want her to use her favorite Bat Boogey Hex on you. You know she will

too, if you keep up this attitude. Maybe you should redirect your frustration elsewhere, and find a girlfriend yourself. You're such a handsome boy, I'm sure you'd have no problems finding a nice girl to take up with. Let me know if you do find someone, and I'll be sure to make her a jumper this Christmas.

Love,

Mum

P.S. Say hello to your sister for me, and tell her to write home soon. I want to hear all about her OWL year, and more about these lucky boys she's been meeting. I smell Girl Talk!

Harry's eyes were tearing as he managed to finish the letter. Oh, he didn't know that Mrs. Weasley had it in her! Now Harry knew where Ginny inherited her sense of humor from. It wasn't the twins; it was her mother! Fred and George must have taken after her as well. Maybe that's why she's always so critical of their work. Perhaps Mrs. Weasley thinks they could do better.

The rest of the Gryffindors were falling all over themselves, as well. Most had meet Mrs. Weasley at one point or another, and none could imagine her really saying the things in her letter, which was so funny.

Phase two of Ginny's plan, was writing a letter to her mum, asking her to go along with the prank played on Ron. She explained how he'd been unbearable to Dean, and how he was even sneaking around school, trying to spy on her. The whole reason Ginny needed to borrow Hedwig, was so that her letter would arrive before Ron's did, so Mrs. Weasley had plenty of warning.

In her reply written to Ginny, Mrs. Weasley had reluctantly agreed to participate in the prank, as long as they didn't take things too far. Ginny was instructed to tell Ron the truth about her hickies, and about the false letter, the same day Ron received it. Otherwise, her mum feared her son would never forgive her.

A post script at the bottom of Ginny's letter had also wondered what charm or potion she had used to simulate hickies on her neck. Ginny had hastily skimmed through that part in her explanation, and it was Mrs. Weasley's own assumption that led to her thinking of potions and charms. In her next letter home, Ginny would just have to say that "a resourceful friend helped me with the problem." Hopefully, she'd just make another wrong assumption; this time that it was Hermione who helped.

Needless to say, later that night after being forced out of his dorm room to confront all those who were in on the joke, Ron took the news with a grain of salt. Ginny had even told the entire truth about Dean, and how they had never really gone out. It was only an act to infuriate Ron, which had worked splendidly. Harry didn't know who was more relieved at the news; Ron or Dean. Each shared a few play

punches with the other, and Harry was glad to see his dorm mates back to close friends.

Ron was still a little upset that Ginny had gone so far to play a joke on him, and even more upset that so many others were in on it. Though, even he admitted he could see a little humor in it all. Especially the letter from his mum, which Harry had saved, and let Ron read again. Now that he knew his mother was in on the prank, it really was funny. How could he have been so thick to believe all that?

With a few more laughs and good natured ribbing, all the Gryffindors turned in for bed late that night. Tomorrow would be the first Hogsmeade trip of the year. The annual Halloween Feast was also being held that weekend, and everyone always looked forward to the great food and fun. Little did they know that friends, food, and fun weren't high up on Voldemort's list of things to do....

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#### AUTHOR NOTES:

I'm back everyone! Sorry about the delay, but as the members of my Yahoo! Group know, I had family in town for a cousin's graduation, and I took some time off. I'm back with a vengeance though, and you can hopefully expect the next chapter in a few days. Don't get used to such fast updates though, this is a one time deal to make up for my truancy. I've also been getting a lot of reviews lately complaining about my lengthy AN's at the end of each chapter. I figure it's only fair that if you take the time to read my fic, I take the time and space to address some of your comments. I know they can get kind of long winded, but unlike some authors who write a 5 page chapter, then a 3 page AN, I hope that my VERY LONG (20 pages minimum!) chapters justify me writing 2 or 3 pages of AN's. And so far I haven't gotten a single warning from the staff here at , so I see no need to stop. So if these AN's bother you, then feel free to stop reading once I finish the chapter. That's why I write them at the end, after all. I hope all the shippers out there liked the sexual tension and physicality of his chapter. You can be sure it won't get any further than this, and it will be some time until I return to writing like this. Next chapter is pure action. I'm talking Arnold Schwarzenegger, Vin Diesel, Wesley

Snipes hardcore action! And now, because I've been gone for a long time, and I've gotten more than the usual number of reviews, here's a lot of those responses I was talking about:

Numba1 – I agree it was a lot of Quidditch, but where did you think I got the chapter title from? You'll be pleased to know that for future games, I'll streamline the action more, and write less. But I accomplished my goal of writing a Quid game, and I think the end result wasn't as terrible as I thought it'd be. Glad you appreciated the DE scene, even if it was harsh. I have to disagree with your statement though that HP are children's books. I believe that they're normal books, that just happen to appeal to kids as well as adults. I don't think JKR will totally ignore violence in books 6 and 7, and I don't think "war" is the proper term for where Harry and co. are heading. I think conflict is a better term, and kids can handle conflict.

Darkmoore – I meant Connie Wood of course, but I must have made a typo. I'm a film buff, so that's where Nat Wood came from. I'll fix it eventually. And no, Harry's not going dark, but he is fighting fire with fire. And he didn't mind doing the Crucio to Burkes because it was done with consent. If you read the chapter over again at Schnoogle, I reworked that part to make Harry more cannon friendly. He was too cold in the original version. And would you really want to see Jason Issacs squatting over a bucket, taking a dump? That's kind of freaky. J/K. Thanks by the way for the advance chps the other day, I really enjoyed them.

Skeeter007 – I take no offense. You point out very good concerns, which I'll try to improve on. After all, this fic is the first thing I've ever written (since high school English), so it's as much a writing practice for me as anything else. Thanks for the insight.

FondyCheesehead – You can claim whatever you want, but as a proud member of the male species, I refuse to believe that young, nubile females everywhere don't engage in at least one pajama party/underwear show a week. Not only that, but I'm sure that it's a huge conspiracy to keep the knowledge of these parties from men. That's why you all go to the bathroom in groups. It's to show off the latest bra/panty set from Victoria's Secrets. And no matter what you

say, or how many other females write in to refute me, I refuse to believe otherwise. Leave me alone, and let a man have his dreams!

Tandywr – I have to apologize again to everyone who took offence to my DE scene. Not wanting to overstep my PG-13 bounds, I even wrote about it, and at their suggestion took out much of the scene. It now exists at my Yahoo! Group for those of you with strong stomachs. I'm pleased at the reaction though. After lengthy discussions with my yahoo group members, I learned that most people are OK with what I wrote, but some were not. I even made a handful of people cry, and one had to stop reading and run to the bathroom, because she had to vomit. I never thought that I'd elicit such reactions from three short paragraphs, but I'm pleased in a weird sort of way. Not pleased that I made people upset, nor pleased because I took pleasure in writing that scene. I guess I'm pleased that I convincingly wrote a rape scene when I have little familiarity with the subject, and that for the most part, although they didn't like to read it, my fans could appreciate the part it takes in my story. It's a necessary evil, and one that fans saw the need to show. Sorry for babbling, later.

Molly Morrison – Harry was offered Muggle Studies b/c he grew up as one. Even so, McGonagall mentioned in her letter that he'd have to take a displacement test. Sort of like a G.E.D. I guess. A lifetime's worth of practical experience must be enough to enter NEWT level Muggle Studies. In my story at least. And please do review again. I'm interested to hear about what you think I might have missed. I think that too sometimes. It's what I'm trying to change in my revisions, which are being published at Schnoogle.

Darak – As far as I know, there are no red cards in Quidditch. True, the rules might allow for a referee to remove players for rough play, but who knows? In a game with over 700 fouls, and such a long history to boot, I think you're just going to have to accept my version of the game in my fic. And even if Madame Hooch was sitting on the sidelines (which is false, there's mention of her being on the field in the first book and movie), there's no way she can keep a panoramic view on the whole pitch. It's too big. There are bound to be some fouls that go unnoticed, even in normal play. And when Slytherins are around, you can bet that that number goes up.

Bella – Let me address your concerns. No, Herm's not getting sappy. Fudge cleared Lucius and some of the others of charges, claiming the “Imperius,” like what happened to him in the past. Sorry about the Brit speak, I'll try to fix that. And yes, 16 year old boys do have hair on their ass. They've gone through puberty after all, and Harry's also older than norm, because of the time tuner. It's a part of his sexuality, and if it makes you feel better, it's not a particularly hairy ass; just fine hairs. I wanted to convey how close and intimate Ginny was when looking at the tattoos. It made them both nervous. And sorry, but I don't see HP as the type of person who waxes. That's more Lockheart.

Gotta B Writin – Thanks, that's one of the best compliments I've ever gotten. I do try. I think I'm already longer than SS was, and the end fic will probably be about the length of OoTP. Scary, huh? A have no idea about the locker rooms, but I don't plan to have the girls spy on the boys, or vice versa. There are 13 year olds present. I can justify Harry and Ginny and their actions (they're horny 15 and 16 year olds), but 13 is a bit too young for me to feel comfortable writing about. Don't worry, there will be plenty more massages and fashion shows in the future. And yes, Herm did get other gifts, but I skipped over those. Who cares what Lavender and Pavarti gave her, anyways? I just talked about the gifts from her closest friends. Thanks for a great review.

Relieved Pitcher – And we're supposed to believe what half-crazy Bella says? Honestly, I figure that her way is ONE way to cast Crucio. The other way is out of need, like Harry has been doing. Or maybe he's funneling his anger about Voldy when using the curse. Or his Occlumency skills are coming into play, as he's using one of his mind's inner subsets. Take it however you want, but you can't use Bella's reason to substantiate cannon. As for not giving every incantation for the new spells I come up with, well, I happen to think that's very cannon. In the 5 HP books so far, JKR only gives incantations for about half of the spells she mentions. Think I'm wrong? Than tell me what the incantations for the Leg Locker Curse, the Fidelius Charm, and the Jelly Legs Jinx are. A stroll through the HP Lexicon spell list will prove my observation.

GinnyPotter – Sorry you're not satisfied with a normal teenage relationship, but I'm not going to provide more Harry/Ginny & Ron/Hermione romance just because that's what you want to read. And I haven't even said that Ron and Herm are going to be together, so please stop assuming. And while I will provide more action in future chapters, if romance is all you want, than I suggest you go to your local bookstore, pick up a paperback with Fabio on the cover, and draw a lightning bolt on his forehead. That's the only way you'll get what you want. Sorry if I sound mean, I don't intend to.

Lethifolder – Wow! You've given me the most in-depth, accurate, and lengthy review I've ever had. Congrats! It would take too much space to respond to everything, so there's only a little I can address. First off, as we learn in cannon, there's less than a dozen registered animagi. And even though we've seen our fair share of illegal ones, I still have to believe that it's a rare trait. And no one has ever mentioned magical animagi, so I doubt that Voldy is a basilisk. Same with Dumble/Harry being a phoenix. Sorry, not going to happen. And if you read back, I've said that Harry is having trouble meditating on his animagus form, so he may not even have the ability. You'll have to read on to know for sure. About the SuperHarry thing, I am trying to show he's not perfect. He almost dies in Knockturn Alley, he was sloppy in his form when hitting Draco and the others on the train. He's not outperforming Hermione in all classes, etc. And please remember, that all his success has come at a cost of his practicing almost non-stop since his summer began, aided by use of the time tuner. It's not so farfetched that his skill level has increased, and Harry's still a long ways away from his end goal. And then there's Ron. I've already admitted that I don't like him, so it's hard to write his character. But I resigned to writing him like a sign wave. He'll have his low points, and then his highs. Right now's he's riding a high point (i.e. showing maturity in accepting Harry and Gin's captaincy), but some Ron bashing will be soon to come. I could go one forever with the other stuff you've written, but I'll stop here. Feel free to email if you want to discuss further.

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I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving 100

reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit. A link to the site is on my bio page.

## Chapter 19 – Trick or Treat

“Are you ready to do this?” Harry asked his future counterpart. It was half an hour before the Halloween Feast was scheduled to begin, and Harry was the last one left in his dorm room. Ron and the others had already headed down to the Great Hall, and Harry had stayed behind with the excuse that he had a headache. Not surprising his friends, because of the way that Harry had acted earlier that day in Hogsmeade, Ron suggested he brew a quick headache remedy before the evening festivities began in earnest. He could have gone to the Hospital Wing for his pain, but Ron knew that Harry kept a decent supply of potion ingredients in his trunk, and liked the extra practice whenever he could get it. Harry thanked his friend for the oddly considerate suggestion, and used that as an excuse to dip into his trunk for a short conversation with his doppelganger. There was something fishy going on, and his double had let him in what was about to go down.

“Yeah; it’s kind of weird though. Leaving the trunk when for so long that’s been the number one rule to follow. But I guess it will work, because I never noticed any discrepancies from my first time around.” Harry’s double was getting dressed for the feast, as it was decided that he would attend in Harry’s place. The real Harry had more important places to be that night. “Now, are you sure you understand everything about what’s about to happen? This is no time to be second guessing yourself. I mean, I’m sure you’ll come through this OK, because I haven’t been erased from existence or anything like that, but I still can’t help but be nervous. This is a lot different than stunning a Death Eater in a dark alley before he has the chance to fight back. We’re talking about a major attack here.”

Harry, now dressed to the hilt in all his dragon armor, minus the cloak, nodded his head. He was nervous about the upcoming trip, but the fact that his future self had filled him in on the basics of what would happen that night, made him more confident than he’d normally be.

“OK then, shrink the trunk down and get ready to leave. The quicker you show up and find cover, the better off you’ll be. Remember to stay hidden as long as possible, and once you’re overwhelmed or discovered, apparate out! It’s impossible to take them all down tonight,

so just grab as many as you can. Oh, and by the way. Remus will know that you're there tonight. Don't ask me how, because it's better if I don't tell you. Just know that he won't say anything to Dumbledore or the others until he talks to you tomorrow, so don't worry about answering his questions. In fact, just ignore him tonight, as he'll only distract you. Got it?"

Harry, who was only hearing about this for the first time in the two hours he and his double had been talking, got a little upset at hearing such important news so soon before he left. "Why didn't you tell me this before? And how will he know I'm there if I stay..."

"I told you," the future Harry answered back sharply, "it's better if you don't know. Trust me, you'll understand for yourself a week from now. Just calm down and get ready to leave. I have to leave soon also, or Dumbledore will know something's up. I can't give away our secret, and I have to act like nothing's wrong at the feast tonight, so you've got to do this alone. Dobby and Winky will be waiting for you when you return."

"Why do they need to be here? Is something going to happen to me?" Harry was really worried now. Usually, Dobby and Winky only worked late at night if Harry had a training accident, and needed their help healing himself or administering potions. What was he in store for?

His double refused to answer though. Instead, he put his navy robes on over the smart shirt and slacks he wore, and walked calmly to the closed door, preparing to leave. The Halloween Feast was one of the few times each year where students were allowed to wear robes other than the school standards. And since Harry had only worn muggle clothing to Hogsmeade earlier that day, this was the first time he'd had a chance to wear them since he purchased them months before. Luckily though, thanks to the extra charms Amber had talked him into buying, the robes had accommodated Harry's slight growth. He could probably still gain another two inches in height, and another ten pounds in weight, before the charms would hit their limits. 'Not that that would ever happen,' Harry thought. For some reason, Harry felt that he had grown all he was ever going to grow. At five foot nine inches, he wasn't short anymore, but was still nowhere near Ron, or even Dean's height. Too many years of starvation and Dursley abuse

had made sure of that. Only Neville remained shorter than Harry, but he had just started another growth spurt. Pretty soon, even he'd be taller than Harry was.

Opening the door, shaking his head to rid it of the inconsequential thoughts he'd been thinking, Harry's future self gave one last look back at the nervous and battle-ready other. It amazed him how nervous he was for the other, even when he knew the exact outcome of what would happen. Still, there were no guarantees in life, and Harry could only hope that things remained as they should, and that nothing would go wrong. Theoretically he knew, if someone at the feast noticed he wasn't the original Harry, a chain of events could possibly change the night's outcome for the dragon armor-clad boy. He'd just have to do his best at the feast to make sure no one knew the difference. With one last look over his shoulder, he wished his other self good luck. He'd need it.

"Be careful, and kick some ass for me. I'll see you soon." And with that said, the future Harry disappeared down the stairs, on his way to meet his friends in the Great Hall. A minute later, Harry himself used a portkey to travel to the Forbidden Forrest, and then with another nervous swallow, disapparated with a pop. Tonight, he'd be fighting Death Eaters!

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Walking down the empty staircase on his way to the feast, Harry thought back one week ago to when he was the one leaving to go do battle. What a strange day that had been. It had started off so good; truly one of the best days Harry had had since returning to Hogwarts. And then, things had gone so bad...

#### FLASHBACK: Earlier That Morning

"Hey Harry, ready to go?" One could tell Ron was excited about the day's Hogsmeade trip, just by the fact he had gotten up early for breakfast, when normally he slept in late on Saturdays. The quicker he ate breakfast, he said, the quicker they could get into town. And since he'd been running low on sweets for awhile now, and Ron's parents had sent him more than the usual amount of spending money

(Ron still didn't know about Harry's gift to the Weasleys), Ron was just itching to be let loose on the town.

Harry just smiled at his friend. The last week had been awkward with all the jokes and misgivings passed around his group of friends, but Harry was really looking forward to taking the day off from his studies. He's promised himself, after all. No training, no homework, no advanced reading; no nothing but spending the day with his friends and having a good time.

"Yeah Ron, let's go eat. I bet the girls are already downstairs."

And sure enough; they were. Lavender, who was waiting in the common room for Seamus, let the two know that Hermione and Ginny had already left for the Great Hall. They too were excited about the Hogsmeade trip. Somehow, the first one of every year was always the best.

As the two boys made their way down, discussing what they had planned for the day and what they wanted to buy, they could both feel the excitement in the air. The current third year students were bouncing off the walls at their first opportunity to visit the only complete wizarding village in all of the U.K. Dennis Creevy hadn't even slept the night before. Instead, he'd stayed up in the common room, trying to work off his extra energy in the Quidditch team's weight room. Since he was the alternate seeker, he was allowed, and even a few hours alternating between the treadmill and other light equipment wasn't enough to tire the exuberant boy out. Harry actually envied the boy's stamina and endless amounts of energy. "It must be a Creevy family trait," he thought.

Breakfast passed by quickly enough, and soon, after checking their names off a list with Filch the caretaker, Harry and his friends were passing under the winged boars of Hogwart's front gate. It was about a fifteen minute walk to the sleepy little village, because the carriages were only used on Hogsmeade trips when the weather was bad. Otherwise, it was too much trouble for the thestrals to be rounded up from the forest and secured in their harnesses.

"You look especially nice today, Harry. Any special occasion?" Hermione had been talking quietly to Ron as Harry got lost in his thoughts, but her question broke him out of his daydream.

It was true, he supposed, that he looked nicer than normal. It wasn't everyday he got the chance to wear muggle clothes other than workout gear or his cords, when he lounged around the common room. Today he was wearing a pair of charcoal grey slacks, a cream colored shirt, his dragon hide boots (he always wore those whenever leaving Hogwarts) and the black leather jacked he had favored so much. The weather was just cold enough to justify the extra protection. Being late October, there was a chill in the air, but not enough yet to call for heavy wool cloaks and robes. And of course, Harry had his vest, both wand holsters, and his dagger with him as well. He never was without those, except when he showered or worked out in private.

"Er, no, not really. I just haven't gotten the chance before now to wear any proper clothing. At school, I'm either wearing school robes, workout gear, or just something comfortable to sit and study in. These are just some of the things I picked up this summer. I was tired of wearing Dudley's old cast-offs."

"Oh, and did someone named Amber, by chance, help you pick those out also?" Harry's eyes snapped up to look Ginny in the face, as she was clearly teasing him. Harry still hadn't told the others about his letters to Amber, and Ginny must have known that. She was just being her troublesome little self.

Since their little adventure in the Room of Requirement a few days before, Harry and Ginny were still slightly uncomfortable around each other, but were quickly getting back to their normal routine. They continued to meet after practices to discuss Quidditch, but hadn't yet managed to get back to their massages. 'Maybe next week,' Harry thought, if he could work up enough courage to broach the subject.

"Amber; who's that? Is that the Hufflepuff you patrol with, mate?" If Ron paid more attention to Harry, Hermione, and Ginny when they discussed prefect patrols, he'd know that his other partner besides

Ginny was named Cami. Still, the fact that Ron at least knew she was a Hufflepuff was more than Harry expected of his best friend.

"No, Ron," Harry corrected him, "Amber's not my patrol partner. That's Cami. Amber is someone I met at Madam Malkin's this summer, who helped me pick out some robes. And no Ginny," Harry gave her a warning glance, "Amber did not help me pick these out. Actually, it was another girl named Becky. A very nice girl if I remember."

Harry couldn't help but joke back, since it wasn't often he came up with such a witty retort. In appreciation, Ginny remained silent and raised an eyebrow in Harry's direction. The look she gave him seemed to say, "Oh yeah, just how many girls helped you pick out new clothes this summer, Harry?" Harry just laughed in response to the look, and Ginny joined in after trying to hold back the giggles.

"Did I miss something?" Ron asked Hermione. Neville, Luna, and a few other members of the D.A. who were walking with them also didn't get the joke. They all gave confused looks to each other.

"I think we all missed something there, Ron. Probably some private joke we don't get. Forget about it. If Harry wants us to know about it, he'll tell us."

Harry overheard Hermione's advice as he and Ginny rejoined the others, and gave her an appreciative smile as the conversation continued in a more normal manner.

Soon the group entered the village, and by the looks of the freshly painted stores and new, decorative banners in the windows, the town was looking forward to the students' visit just as much as the students were. Briefly, Harry wondered how much the town really relied on the school and its students for financial support. Being so close together, it was almost like a symbiotic relationship for the two.

'Well, you all have a nice time,' Ginny waved to the trio of friends. She was going off on her own with Neville, Luna, Dean, and a few others. "Hermione, make sure my dolt of a brother doesn't eat the entire supply of Honeyduke's chocolates and makes himself sick.

Let's meet up later for a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks, alright?"

Ron gave a snort in response, but Harry could see humor in his eyes. Hermione and Harry didn't bother to pretend to be insulted, and laughed outright at the joke. As the three moved off on their own, they waved to the departing larger group, and agreed to the later rendezvous. A perfect Hogsmeade trip always ended with a nice warm or cool butterbeer; depending on the weather.

"So, where shall we go first?" Harry asked his two best friends. Harry had been happy that Ginny was going off with Luna, Neville and the others, because that gave him time to spend with Hermione and Ron alone. They hadn't done much of that in the past months, and it was sorely overdue.

"Well, I need to get to Scrivenshaft's to buy some ink and new quills, and I want to check out the latest releases at Dervish and Bangs, but other than that, I can go wherever you all want." It sure wasn't Ron who commented on getting new homework supplies. Hermione was the one who answered Harry's question first.

'Well, I just need to go to Honeydukes. I'm really low on sweets, and after I gave some away to the first years last week, I'm in desperate need for a re-stock. I guess I could use some more parchment too. Those remedial classes aren't as bad as yours' are, but I still have a few essays to write every week. And I'm running out of my supply from last year.'

Harry nodded. He only knew a little about Ron's new classes, as only Neville shared some of his remedial classes, but he knew enough to know that Ron was really applying himself this time around. He didn't want to be in the same classes with Ginny next year, so he was hoping to do well enough to be placed back with his year mates in normal seventh year Transfiguration and Charms NEWT classes. He wouldn't mind dropping potions all together, and then he could continue with DADA, Divination, and CoMC as well. That wasn't such a bad course load for seventh year.

"No trip to Zonkos, Ron?" Harry asked. He didn't remember a single trip when Ron wouldn't at least buy a supply of dung bombs, wet-start fireworks, or at least some exploding snap packs.

A pained expression crossed his friend's face. Hermione giggled, as she obviously knew what was going on.

"I really want to," Ron explained, "but the twins won't let me or Ginny shop there anymore. Because now they're competition, so they claim. But honestly, it's not like Fred and George give me a discount, or anything. They don't even offer the same types of products. But nooooo, I'm only allowed to buy joke products from Weasley's Wheezes, they say. Ginny doesn't mind, since she prefers her own tactics when it comes to pulling pranks, but I've always enjoyed dung bombs and the like. And now I can't get more; my supply ran out weeks ago. And the twins made Ginny promise to tell them if I did buy anything from Zonkos. I think they struck a secret deal or something, or maybe bribed her. Did you notice Ginny's new robes this year? They're not even second hand! Fred and George must have paid her off to keep an eye out for me. Honestly!"

Harry couldn't help from laughing at his friend's over-blown conspiracy theory. Harry knew perfectly well where the extra money for Ginny's new robes had come from, and he was sure that she wouldn't rat out one brother to another unless there was more in it for her than just a few sickles. Harry doubted that Ginny would turn Ron in.

"Ron, don't you have new robes this year too?" Hermione asked. She too thought Ron was overreacting. "So do you have a secret deal with the twins, as well?"

Ron bristled with indignation. "Are you mental? Making a deal with those two; I'd have to be unbalanced! And Mum paid for these robes herself, thank you. Fred and George had nothing to do with them."

"Then don't you think," Harry asked, "that it stands to reason your mum bought new robes for Ginny as well? It's not like her to show favoritism among her kids, after all. I think you're getting paranoid,

Ron. Probably spent too much time around Mad-Eye Moody this summer. What do you think, Hermione?"

Hermione giggled at Harry's joke. She nodded, and barely managed out, "Yes, very insightful Harry."

Ron was getting all huffy again, and so close to the last time when Ginny and he had played the joke on him, Harry ended the teasing and assured Ron he'd be able to buy whatever he wanted from the joke shop, and not have to worry about Ginny snitching on him. Harry even offered to buy the items for Ron, if he preferred, so the purchases couldn't be traced back to him. Ron liked that idea better, and Zonkos became their first stop.

After rearming himself with his essentials courtesy of Harry, the trio moved on to Scrivenshaft's to let Hermione get her supplies. Ron went off by himself to select a ream of essay-length parchment rolls, and Harry was left alone to wonder.

Not needing a refill on parchment or ink, because his private study desk in the library had refilling spells on its supply, Harry really didn't need to purchase anything. However, he knew a small purchase wouldn't hurt, if only to spice up his very stale and repetitive life. Not that classes and discussions with his friends were boring, but the other half of the time when Harry was left alone in his trunk was. Besides, Harry hadn't spent any money since arriving at school expect for Hermione's birthday gift, so he felt like he could treat himself to something nice.

After some debating on the nice things offered in the shop, Harry decided to purchase a matching desk blotter set. Up till now Harry had just been writing on a old textbook to blot his writing, but the set would replace that nicely, and be a little more proper too. It contained a thick desk blotter made of leather and engraved wood, four stylized eagle feather quills with adjustable quicks, a stand to hold wet quills and an inkpot, and a wax seal set, complete with different color candle waxes and a metal stamp, which could be spelled to the wizard's own design. Harry didn't know yet what he'd chose as his personal seal, but between the sometimes boring books he had to

read, and the painful Cruciatus sessions he inflicted on himself, Harry had plenty of time to think about it.

As a last minute addition, Harry also grabbed a couple of voice activated quills. They were very expensive, almost as costly as the Quick-Quote- Quills that the store had on sale. But unlike Rita Skeeter's choice of writing instruments, the voice activated quills recorded what was said verbatim, without adding colorful dialogue. Harry still had plans to have a long talk with Seth when he had the time, and these quills would work perfectly as he translated the Parseltongue that Seth spoke. That way he could keep his mind on listening to his small friend, and not worry about whether he was correctly recording the information. These quills had a one hundred percent guarantee on accurate notes, and Harry was planning on holding the company to their claims.

Wanting to get all the boring stuff out of the way first, Ron suggested that they visit Dervish and Bangs next. Hermione didn't argue, so off they were. She again got lost in the stacks of old and musty smelling books, and Ron joined Harry perusing the Quidditch section, looking for the one book in all the wizarding world they hadn't read about the sport yet. There were a few team play books from years past, and Ron convinced Harry to buy one from the Chudley Cannons' team of 1683, telling him it would be a good investment as Quidditch captain. Harry didn't see how a three hundred year old playbook could be helpful, as the plays were probably wide known now, but Harry didn't argue for Ron's sake. Maybe there might even be something useful in them after all.

Tired of looking, Ron sat in a corner armchair and opened the latest copy of "Quidditch Throughout the Ages" to read. Not feeling like reading himself, Harry decided to go see how Hermione was fairing. He found her in the Charms section, with about a dozen books in her hands.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! Are all those for you!" Trust it to her to turn a weekend holiday into a quest to restock the school library. And Harry just knew he'd be forced to help lug around the heavy pile the rest of the day. Ron would probably complain even more, once he found out.

But Hermione surprised Harry with her answer. It was certainly the last thing he expected her to say. "No, actually, they're for you."

Harry just did his Ron impression, not completely understanding what she meant. The look on his face must have been easy to read, because she explained.

"Honestly Harry. With all the books in the school library, not the mention the ones you've been loaning me these past weeks, on top of all my school work, and keeping ahead of you in Transfiguration, when do you think I have the time to read extra books? True, I'd like to, but by helping out with the D.A., and some of the new prefect responsibilities that I have to attend to, there are just other more important things for me to do right now."

Harry was silently surprised those words had come out of Hermione's mouth, but was even more surprised as she continued.

"You on the other hand, I never see doing school work, hardly see reading all those books you have access to, and spend entirely too much time in Quidditch meetings, practicing, and helping the fifth year students study for their upcoming OWLs. I don't honestly know how you do it, but if you have so much extra time to spend writing love letters to some girl you met over the summer, than you can certainly spare a little extra time learning some new material. These books I've picked out for you are advanced spells and defense texts I haven't seen in your personal library. I figure you could read them in your extra time."

Harry was doing a goldfish impression now. Not just because Hermione had gone out of her way to help Harry bulk up on his general knowledge and magic skills, but because of what she said. Write love letters to some girl? Ginny must have told her about Amber. And now, Ginny was going to die!

"I don't know what you mean, writing love letters to some girl? Ginny must have just been playing with you, Hermione."

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "Honestly Harry, Ginny hasn't said a word, although now that whole "Amber" joke from earlier makes

sense. I just mean every week you get a perfume scented pink envelope delivered by owl, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out what's going on. Even Ron has noticed, by the way. Every time you run off to "not be late for class" to obviously read the letters, the two of us place bets on the stupid looks you'll have on your face for the rest of the day. It doesn't take a rocket scientist."

Harry felt horribly embarrassed now. Rather than try to further deny the facts, he just looked through the pile Hermione had cradled in her arms. Thankfully, she dropped the subject too.

"So what have you found for me? I still have plenty of books to catch up with in my library, but some more texts couldn't hurt."

And so Hermione showed him. Surprisingly, the all turned out to be excellent choices. Because this store carried a different selection than Flourish and Blotts did, Hermione was able to find some advanced texts that Harry hadn't seen before. What's more, Hermione was able to find some Charms texts that didn't seem like they could be used for dueling, but after a careful explanation, he found that they would be very effective. It followed right with Harry's theme of finding alternate and creative ways of casting spells in a fight. The more creative and inventive a strategy, Harry believed, the less likely his opponent would be prepared to defend against it.

One selection Harry returned to the shelf because he already owned it, but the rest he bought with the Cannon's playbook. Hermione could have sworn she hadn't seen the title among Harry's other books, but what she didn't know was that he hid some titles from her every time he allowed her access to his library. Whenever he'd call down a warning to his double to hide in another compartment, Harry's future self knew to take "Hogwarts: A History" and some of the darker tomes with him. As such, Hermione hadn't been exposed to his whole collection. Frankly, Harry was surprised that Hermione even selected the book. While not true Dark Arts, "Fighting Fire with Fire: Barely Legal Curses Used to Defend Yourself" wasn't sixth year material either. It was auror level reading or beyond, but Hermione picked it up like it was a first year Herbology text.

Harry also managed to grab a few blank journals on his way to the register, bound in thick crimson leather. He remembered all the information Seth said he knew about the days when his master was alive; all the old and forgotten spells and potion recipes. When he got the chance, Harry would use the blank journals and the new quills he bought to make spell and potion diaries; or grimories. ‘Maybe I could even publish a book,’ Harry thought. ‘With my fame alone,’ he mussed, ‘I’d be a best seller overnight.’ Even if what he wrote was pure drivel. Oh, the horrors of being famous.

When Harry and Hermione had completed their purchases, and Ron reshelfed the Quidditch book in the nearby cooking section (and the shelf spit it back out into his face, forcing him to put it back correctly), the trio left for their last main stop of the day; Honeydukes.

Ron’s eyes lit up as he entered the store, and Harry couldn’t blame him. Candy manufacturers always came out with their best new products early in fall, for both the upcoming holidays, and for the school visits Hogwarts always made into Honeydukes. The shelves were overflowing with tasty and delectable sweets, and Harry noticed there were almost twice as many products as when he’d last been in the store.

That was the day of Harry’s award ceremony and Fudge’s humiliation, when he and Dumbledore had escaped the press by way of a secret passage. Remus had since told him that the passage was now being monitored by Dumbledore through use of security wards, but Harry didn’t mind. He had other ways outside the school, and at least now the route wasn’t accessible to hostile parties, like any Death Eaters Wormtail might have told, for instance.

Fudge himself was still Minister, although just barely, much to Harry’s satisfaction. He escaped most of the blame of Harry’s accusations by using his staff as a scapegoat. Percy Weasley had learned that well. Last Harry heard, he was still working in the Centaur Liaison office. And if Fudge’s popularity ratings got any lower, he might soon be joined his former aide there.

As Harry got lost in his thoughts again, Ron went crazy, tossing almost every new sweet he could get his hands on in a shopping

basket. Hermione was more deliberate about her modest selection, and mostly stuck to her personal favorites like sugar quills and cockroach clusters. Harry still didn't know how she could eat those (they had real cockroaches in them!), but Hermione assured him they tasted quite lovely. They had a lot of protein too, her parents had told her. Apparently, Hermione's parents liked chocolate covered ants and grasshoppers, as they were a more natural candy. Her first year, when Hermione had seen the cockroach clusters, she'd made sure to bring some home for the summer. Since then, they were a favorite of the whole Granger family.

"Oh Harry, look at this!" Hermione's voice beckoned Harry over to a dark corner, where a small stand was set up. Hermione was laughing quietly to herself, and when Harry read the makeshift sign for himself, he knew why. "Exotic Muggle Sweets from Around the World!"

What was even funnier though, was that none of the sweets were particularly exotic or foreign. There were bars of Ghirardelli chocolate, salt water taffies, regular licorice jellies, fruit (not blood) flavored lollies, and an assortment of super sour sweets called Warheads. Knowing what those were from when he had once nicked some from Dudley, Harry grabbed a few packs, hoping a certain someone would appreciate their sour flavor. Harry remembered that taste for himself, as well as the puckered face he had made, and couldn't wait to deliver them.

Eventually Hermione and Harry had made their purchases, but still had to wait another twenty minuets for Ron to finish his. When he finally did leave the store, he had a chocolate frog half out of his mouth, with the legs still twitching.

"Oh, Ron. That's disgusting!" Hermione turned her face away in disapproval.

"Ah, Hermione," Ron said swallowing the confectionary amphibian, "you just have no appreciation for the finer things in life."

Harry could see where Ron was taking this, and bit his lip as Hermione took up the bait.

"Finer things in life? What on earth are you talking about?"

"My dear Hermione," Ron put on a pretend knightly accent, "frog legs are a delicacy in cultured circles which you're obviously not a part of. Don't blame me because you're barbarian palate prefers eating insects over finer cuisine."

Now it was Hermione's turn to huff and pout as Ron and Harry had a good laugh at her mock indignation, but she wasn't really upset they knew. For as much as she scolded Ron about his lack of culture, eating habits, and overall sensitivity, even she could accept he had poked good fun at her.

Midday had fast approached, but as had become tradition, both boys swore off eating lunch, instead wanting to hold their appetites for the holiday feast. Hermione insisted on something small to eat though, and Harry convinced Ron for a quick stop at the Three Broomsticks for a small sandwich. It took less than a minute for Hermione to place her order, and another minute for the house-elves that must work in the back to get it ready. And although Hermione would have liked to sit down to eat, she reluctantly agreed to take her lunch with her, so the trio could continue their walk around the village.

A few new shops had opened up since the year before, including a new teen magazine, a wizard knick knacks shop, and a small café. The post office had increased in size too, and now offered a wide range of owls and other exotic birds for both short and long distance delivery. Previously, the Hogsmeade post office was only capable of delivering letter as far as Diagon Alley. Another bird at the main branch could then make the final delivery if necessary, but the charges were usually enormous. Since students normally had access to the school owlery, usually it was only the townsfolk who used the Hogsmeade post office. Still, they must have done decent business if they had to expand.

The next two hours Harry and his friends spent exploring the new shops, and ventured into some of the lesser known parts of town. Many homes were located on out of the way side streets, most likely to get away from the business side of town. Still, they were nice to look at, and Harry in particular marveled at the odd architecture he'd

never before seen. The Burrow had been the only other wizarding house he'd ever seen, and apparently it wasn't the only one to be held up by mere magic. 'If a muggle contractor could see these houses,' Harry thought, 'they'd faint at the sight of the seemingly shoddy craftsmanship.'

Working their way back towards the busy part of town, the group ran into Luna, Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Padma. It was decided they'd have that drink at the Three Broomstick now, and made their way there. Dean and Padma excused themselves, saying they were going to meet up with Seamus, Lavender, Pavarti, and some more Ravenclaw friends, so Harry bid them goodbye, and was left with only his "core" group. These were the same people who had backed him up in the Department of Mysteries, and he owed them a lot.

"Six butterbeers please," Harry asked of the barmaid. Madam Rosmerta was away for the moment, and it was probably a good thing too. Ron still got a little red in the face whenever she was around. Not as bad as when Fleur Delacour had talked to him, but red in the face nonetheless. While Ginny and Luna grabbed an empty table in the back, Harry paid for the drinks and asked to borrow a tray. He might be able to carry six beer mugs, but he might also end up wearing half of them.

"Cheers, Harry. How much do we owe you?" Neville asked. He was sitting in the far corner of the table, with Luna and Ginny to his right side, and Hermione and Ron to his left. Harry took the empty seat between Ron and Ginny, and gave out the mugs.

"It's on me today, mate. My treat. I figure it's the least I can do after all you've done for me lately. I never did thank you all for helping me out at the Ministry last year. So thanks."

Neville seemed kind of uncomfortable, Luna was staring at the peeling wallpaper, and Ron and Hermione had already gotten this speech before. Ginny was the only one to have something to say.

"So we risk our lives, and expulsion, to go with you and save your arse. Neville breaks his nose, Luna gets knocked out, Ron gets

attacked by Merlin knows what, Hermione nearly gets her boobs hexed off, and I get a sprained ankle, and all you think that's worth is a lousy butterbeer?" Ginny was pretending to be hurt and outraged, but everyone at the table knew better. Well, maybe Luna did, if she had heard any of that.

Playing along, Harry answered, "Of course all that's worth more than just a lousy butterbeer. Ginny, you're hurting my feelings." Turning around and waving to get the attention of the returned patron, Harry called out, "Madam Rosmerta, a bowl of your finest beer nuts, please!"

Neville and Ron were snickering into their hands, and Hermione was giggling along with Ginny, who gave a small bow to Harry's cleverness. Luna also turned her attention to the group, "Ohh, I just love beer nuts. Did you know Ronald that some wizards use beer nuts to lay traps for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks because they like the sweet taste so much?"

Ron looked panicked for a moment. Hermione was sharing amusing glances with Ginny again, and Harry was trying to hold in his laughter too.

"Er, no Luna, I ah, I didn't know that." To prevent her from expecting further conversation from him, Ron grabbed a handful of the nuts and shoved them into his mouth as soon as they were delivered. Harry suspected that there were more crumbs on Rob's robes than actually in his mouth, but didn't say anything.

A few more jokes and light teasing at Ron's expense were made by Ginny, and Harry just happily sipped on the delicious beverage in his hands. Still, after nearly one a day for the past few months, he still wasn't sick of butterbeer. And it was served cold still, which meant that Madam Rosmerta didn't think the weather chilly enough yet for her to start heating it up. Excitedly, Harry couldn't wait to have the first, frothy warm drink of the season. He'd just have to wait for the next Hogsmeade weekend.

Light conversation passed for the next twenty minutes, most of which included trading tales of class stories and gossip heard around the

castle. Harry was glad for once none of it was about him. So far, nothing unusual had happened to him as far as the public knew, and that was just fine with him.

Su Li and Anthony Goldstein in Ravenclaw were dating now, Harry was informed, as well as Ernie McMillan and Hannah Abbott in Hufflepuff. A few more couples were getting together, and Ginny tried to get a rise out of Ron by asking who was still available. Ron didn't seem to mind though, and pointed out that Crabbe and Goyle were still unattached, unless of course they were seeing each other, and even then Ginny might like that. 'Touché, Ron,' Harry smiled.

Eventually though, the small talk faded, and the serious began. Harry knew it was coming, but it still didn't make it any easier for him.

"So Harry, what have you been doing with yourself this whole year? Besides playing Quidditch, classes, or helping Ginny and Luna study, we haven't seen much of you around the common room." It was Neville who broke the terse silence when they all knew Harry had some explaining to do.

So, painfully and slowly, Harry tried explaining to the group how he had felt at the end of last year, and how his attitude had changed to want to be more proactive in the fight against Voldemort. He didn't tell them about the time tuner, the captured Death Eater, or any of his other secrets, but he did let them in on just how much extra reading and work he was really doing.

"Basically," Harry explained, "whenever you don't see me in class, on the pitch, or in the common room, I'm locked away in my room, doing all the reading on advanced spells and curses I can." Harry didn't have to retell them all about his trunk and library, since they had all seen it weeks earlier. But even Ron and Hermione never knew he was spending so much time dedicating himself to his studies.

"So that's why you're so good in Transfiguration lately? I've been killing myself just to stay ahead of you, and now I know why." Hermione looked relieved at the news. "I thought I was falling behind, and that you were just learning everything easily. Now it all makes sense though. Even how you conjured those chairs when we gave

those first year Slytherins a tour. I never did buy that excuse you used.”

Harry gave a weak smile to his bushy-haired friend. True, her hair was a lot less bushier than it used to be, no doubt thanks to some new product, but at heart she was still the same overbearing, know-it-all friend he had relied on so much in the past. It was no wonder she looked relieved to find out that her falling behind in classes was only due to another doing even more studying. That, she could handle. A much better excuse then, “Sorry Herm, it just comes easily.”

“But why are you so gung-ho all of a sudden about being so involved in the fighting?” Ron asked. “Let the Order worry about it, I say. I mean, it’s not as if you’ve got to fight You-Know-Who yourself, yet you’re gearing up to be some sort of warrior. Not even aurors put themselves through so much work and practice.”

A very insightful question from Ron, and Harry could see by the nodding heads of the others that he couldn’t weasel out of this question. Giving one last deep sigh, Harry stared down at his hands, beckoning them closer.

“It’s the prophecy, Ron. When Neville smashed it, no offence Neville, we all thought it was lost. None of us heard it, and neither did any of the Death Eaters. However, later that night when I got sent to Dumbledore’s office, he explained to me that he was the person who originally heard it. The glass sphere was just a copy, made from his memory. So he was able to tell me what it was; and it wasn’t good news. Voldemort already knows what the first part of the prophecy says, so I guess it can’t hurt to tell you.

“The one with the power to vanquish to Dark Lord approaches....Born to those who’ve thrice defeated him....Born as the seventh month dies...”

The table remained in silence, each pondering over what Harry had shared, until Ron blurted out, “What the bloody hell does that mean? The power to defeat him?”

Looking up now, Harry saw that all the smiles and laughs were gone from all his friend's faces. "That's why's he after me, Ron. That's why he's always been after me. My parents were part of the Order, and they escaped him in some way or another three times. And I was born at the end of July."

"As the seventh month dies..." Luna repeated.

Harry nodded grimly. The only small comfort he felt was that he didn't have to tell them the rest of the prophecy. No doubt, at least one of them, most likely Hermione, would lose it and react just as harshly as he did the first time Dumbledore told him.

"But....but that means....that, that I could be the one...." Neville was a pale green color, just entertaining the thought.

"Don't worry Neville, it's not you. It could have been, because of your birthday and your parents also belonging to the Order. But when Voldemort chose to come after me, for whatever reason, he fulfilled that part of the prophecy. The rest of it just confirms that for us. Even Dumbledore knows it's definitely me. In fact, the reason your parents were attacked later that year, was probably because you also fitted the description. Voldemort wasn't around to tell them they were just wasting their time. I hope you don't blame me that sometimes I wish you were the bloody Boy-Who-Lived. That I might have had a normal life. But then I know that I'd never wish my life on anyone else, so I'm glad it was me and not you also."

Neville seemed to accept Harry's answer, and just nodded.

"But what does the rest of the prophecy say; the part You-Know-Who doesn't know about?" Ginny asked. She'd been awful serious since Harry had started this conversation. It reminded him of the way Ginny used to be around him, when she still had her crush and ran from the room whenever he was around.

"Sorry Gin, it's better if you don't know. The information could be damaging if Voldemort ever found out. But as only I and Professor Dumbledore know it, it could also be a huge advantage for our side. As long as we keep it from Voldemort, we still have that to look

forward to. And he doesn't even know that I know the prophecy's contents. He suspects, I think, but he doesn't know for sure. It's because of his indecision that he's been so quiet lately. He probably doesn't want to tip his hat until he learns one way or another for sure that Dumbledore' shared the prophecy with me."

The others nodded, and Ron got up from the table to get refills for everyone. As the whole group was staring quietly at the blank wood table, or at their hands, no one saw a cloaked blonde-haired boy leaved quickly from a nearby booth, and head out the door. Leaving all the others behind, he made his way to the new post office, and rented one of their priority owls. Scribbling a short note to his father, and attaching it to the eagle owl's leg, the blonde-haired boy threw the bird into the air with an evil smirk on his face. If the information was as important as Potter claimed it to be, his father would be greatly pleased with the news he had overheard.

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After Harry had let loose the bombshell that was the prophecy, and after another round of drinks, things started to return back to normal. Almost like Harry and Dumbledore acted like nothing was wrong with their relationship these days, the group selectively forgot the bad news and talked about more normal things. The upcoming Quidditch match next weekend for instance, when Hufflepuff would take on Ravenclaw. There was a lot of speculation about Hufflepuff's new seeker, as it had been reported that he had practiced a lot during the summer. According to rumor, Cho would have her work cut out for her.

It was about a half hour after the talk had returned to normal banter, and the students were just getting ready to return to the school, that Harry felt the first pricks of what he knew couldn't be a good sign. His scar was hurting.

"Ouch," Harry exclaimed, pressing his palm to his forehead. He had already finished his third butterbeer (his limit), when what felt like a sharp, hot poker got pressed to his skin. The pain faded as soon as his hand hit his head, but the feeling was unmistakable. Harry had not

felt his scar pain accept in visions since before the DoM battle, but he knew that feeling well.

“What’s wrong Harry? Is it your scar?” Hermione asked nervously. Harry thought it was fairly obvious it was, but he knew Hermione, and the others too, were just worried.

He nodded his head yes, slowly as to not increase the pain, and Harry shut his eyes to practice some of his Occlumency techniques. It wouldn’t help with the pain at all, but at least Harry could be sure he wasn’t receiving any false visions of feelings that Voldemort might be sending him. That had worked before, and damned if Harry was going to let it work again.

“Here you go Harry, maybe this will help.” Ron pushed an ice cold mug into his hands. There was still a swallow of butterbeer in the bottom, but Ron didn’t seem to mind giving up his beverage. Harry took the offered mug and pressed its cool glass up to his head. It was a tremendous relief.

“Thanks, Ron. That feels great.”

“Are you getting any images like last time? What do you feel?” Someone asked. Harry thought it was either Luna or Ginny.

“No images this time, but he’s happy. He’s happier than he’s been in a long time.” Harry had managed to open his eyes again, and saw the concerned looks in each of their faces.

“Happy how? I didn’t even know You-Know-Who could be happy?” Ron asked. “Isn’t that a little creepy?”

“It’s not happy really, that’s just the first emotion that came to mind,” Harry explained. He pondered what he had felt some more, and then continued. “It’s more like he’s anxious. Looking forward to something, and excited about it happening. Does that make any sense?”

It didn’t to anyone, but then again Harry was glad that none of his friends understood the inner workings of a mad man’s mind.

"We should get back to the castle, to tell Professor Dumbledore," Hermione suggested.

Harry gave her an evil glance, but she returned it right back

"Don't look at me that way Harry. I know you don't feel the same towards Professor Dumbledore this year. And after telling us some of what happened last year with the prophecy, I don't totally blame you. But he's still the head of the Order. He'll need to know that something might be in the works. If he isn't warned, and something bad does happen, I don't think I ever could forgive myself. Do you?"

Harry was surprised at her candidness, and felt a little shamed. Hermione had also warned him about going after Sirius without confirmation. If he had only listened to her more then...

"OK Hermione, I learned my lesson last year. We'll go tell Dumbledore. Let's go then." Turning back to Neville, Ginny, and Luna, Harry added, "You three don't have to come if you don't want to. There's still over an hour left in town, if you want to go off on your own. I think we," Harry pointed to himself, Hermione, and Ron, "can handle this by ourselves."

Neville spoke for all of the others when he said, "That's OK Harry, I don't think we're in the mood for shopping and anymore. Let's all go back."

And so the six students were the first to head back to the large gates of Hogwarts, with Harry being supported by both sides by his friends. It's not as if he was an invalid, but the steering they gave him allowed him to close his eyes and block out some of the pain. It was much duller now, more of an aftereffect than anything else, but it still hurt more than a mild discomfort.

Once inside the castle, Harry immediately headed towards the headmaster's office, but the direction was in the total opposite direction of Gryffindor tower. And right now all Harry wanted to do was take a pain relief potion and lie in bed. Seeming to read his mind, Ginny suggested he do just that.

"Why don't you go up to bed Harry, and rest before the feast tonight. Unless there's anything other than the sense of anxiousness you sensed, I don't really see your need to be with us. We can tell Dumbledore that. Ron, why don't you go with him, to make sure he doesn't have another attack on the way."

Half of Harry wanted to argue, and the other thought Ginny's idea was the best one he'd ever heard of. In the end his bed won out, and Harry thanked the group with a small smile and wave over his head as Ron supported him by the shoulders and led him off in the opposite direction.

Once in his dorm room, Harry was feeling much better, but still not perfect. In his trunk he swallowed an all-purpose pain relief potion, much like muggle aspirin, and had a short talk with his double. Knowing all about what was going to happen that night, his double said they needed a much longer and more serious chat, and Harry had to skive off Ron for a short time.

Ron provided the perfect excuse when he suggested that Harry brew a headache potion (Ron didn't know that Harry had already taken a ready made one), and Harry learned all about what he'd have to do that night, and the preparations he'd need to make. The day was only just beginning. And it was bound to get much worse.

#### END FLAHBACk

Once down the stairs and in the Great Hall, Harry stood in awe of Hagrid's giant pumpkins and the real live bats and bugs that decorated the space. Halloween never turned out exactly as planned for the school of Hogwarts lately, and Harry hadn't enjoyed the past feasts as much as he could have. There was Sir Nicolas's deathday party that one year, then Sirius's break in when the students had to sleep in conjured sleeping bags. And of course, the death of his parents. Too many bad memories. And even though his other self was off about to engage in battle, as he had done one week ago himself, the future Harry swore he'd do everything in his power to enjoy the feast as much as possible.

All his friends once again looked concerned, but he made a point to look as normal as possible, to not let on that they weren't noticing a different Harry than earlier in the day, and to not let on that he was plenty worried. Even Dumbledore, who had obviously been told about Harry's earlier episode, gave a concerned look in his direction. Harry had no doubt that they'd be talking privately before the night was over with, but right now Harry only gave a weak smile and turned back to the feast.

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Hundreds of miles away, at the same moment one Harry was sitting down at the Gryffindor table ready to eat, another one, the real one, had just apparated into the same dark, empty back alley in Diagon Alley that he had used before. The sun was just setting in the west, and the streets were still filled with last minute shoppers and whole families, come to celebrate one of the wizarding world's most popular holidays. Knowing that the back alley was seldom used, Harry decided to set up a base of operations there, and under cover of his invisibility cloak, began the preparations.

Not wanting to get caught up in loose sleeves or baggy wizard robes, under his cloak Harry wore, besides his dragon hide pants, vest, and boots, a simple tight black tee shirt. His arms were left bare for quicker access to his holsters, and if all went according to plan, and he remained hidden under his cloak the whole night, his lack of full dress wouldn't matter much.

The one thing Harry had to add was his trusty black bandana. His hair was long enough now to pull back in a loose pony tail, but because his hair was so unruly and wavy, it would still have to be much longer before it would stay tied back. If his hair was instead more straight and flat, like Snape's, it would stay in place better. Harry didn't wish for that though. The last thing he needed was to be compared to looking like Snape. 'Thank Merlin for small favors,' Harry thought.

Making sure the area was warded against apparition, and placing several notice-me-not charms as well, Harry did his best to make sure that no one would enter the space for the rest of the night. Once

done, Harry quietly entered the main shopping areas of the busy street, and did a little scout work to see where the best places for ambushes would be. He himself would be setting up ambushes of his own kind, and wouldn't need the locations he found. But he figured that when the action started, that's where the Death Eaters would be. They were too cowardly to attack the public out in the open. Instead they'd use cover of darkness and greater numbers to accomplish their goals. Plus, Harry already found out where the Death Eaters would be from his future self. All he had to do now was wait for them, and according to his watch, that time was only minutes away.

Thinking about his watch, Harry made sure the light shield spell it emitted was up and functional, and that the emergency portkey was ready too. He had planned on apparating out if things got too sticky, but if the Death Eaters put up their own anti-apparation fields, at least then Harry would have an alternate means of escape.

It happened sometime later, while Harry was waiting patiently under the awning of a small, closed shop, that he started to hear explosions and screaming coming from the Leaky Cauldron side of town. Moving quietly so he wasn't heard, Harry began making his way there, looking for prey.

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Back at school, another Harry was tucking into his second helping of roasted chicken and Yorkshire pudding. Ron and Hermione were engaged in another of their pointless arguments, and Harry was content to just sit and listen. Since Hermione had finished Harry's book on house-elf history and culture, she had given serious thought to how to readjust S.P.E.W.'s end goals, and she was thinking about starting it up again. Ron was arguing that if anyone was interested they would have shown it the first time around. Hermione argued that now that the organization's goals would be different and more realistic, that wasn't true.

Harry just smiled, refusing to take a side in the debate, and engaged in light conversation with all the nearby Gryffindors as he refilled his plate with the special holiday gourmet foods. A brief look at his watch let him know that the attack in Diagon Alley had just started, and

Harry was no doubt already involved in the action. His job now was to silently observe the staff, especially Dumbledore, and try to appear as normal as possible. Hopefully Harry would be able to handle the situation in Diagon Alley himself, and be alright. Hopefully....

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'One down, many more to go,' Harry thought grimly. He'd just got done stunning a Death Eater who had made the mistake of wandering off alone, and Harry had already deposited him in the empty alley that Harry was thinking of as his home base. The Death Eater had put up more of a fight than Sean Hazelton had, but fighting an invisible opponent was one advantage that Harry was happy to have.

His first curse, a stunner, had missed by mere inches, and the jet of light had alerted the Death Eater to Harry's presence. Harry's second curse, Impedimenta, was likewise avoided. This time it was aimed dead on, but while Harry himself was invisible, his spells were not. The unknown Death Eater had plenty time to erect a shield to deflect the spell, and shot back one of his own in the general direction that he thought his enemy was in.

Managing to dodge the spell effortlessly (it wasn't really that close) Harry realized that he'd have to get a bit closer to the Death Eater to hit him with a spell, unless he used something more creative and powerful. Wanting to save his energy and unique ideas for true battle conditions, Harry opted for the first choice.

Quietly approaching in a winding pattern, Harry was soon behind the masked man, and reached out to tap him on the shoulder. The Death Eater, who was listening for movement and occasionally sending out a spell in the wrong direction, took the bait and swung around before even thinking about the possible consequences.

With the Death Eater's head craned over his shoulder, and being momentarily defenseless, Harry acted on impulse. The stunning spell he had planned on was forgotten as Harry drew back his right arm, curled his hand into a fist, and let loose with all the strength he had.

A sickening crunch sounded as Harry's right hook collided with the man's thin white mask, made of a material Harry couldn't identify. The crunch was too loud for just the mask itself, and Harry felt an odd sense of accomplishment that he had most likely broken the man's jaw or nose. Violence was so much more satisfying than a well placed curse of hex. Of course, it was impractical for Harry to go around punching all his opponents. Already, his hand was sore and beginning to throb. He hadn't broken any of his own bones, but a thin line of blood was dripping from two of his knuckles. Unless Harry came across Malfoy or Lestrange, he thought it best if from now on he stuck to strictly using magic. Or if need be, kicks at the most, but definitely no more punches. Another one like the last, and Harry might not be able to properly grip his wand.

Death Eater number two deposited (Hazleton was the first), Harry strode back out into the alley, looking for more masked men. By now most of the innocent shoppers had taken refuge in the busy shops and stores all along the street, and thankfully none of the Death Eaters were entering them, or even directing their spells through the windows. Instead it looked like they were just randomly throwing destructive spells around, causing as much damage as possible. Many signs, storefronts, and awnings were already blown to smithereens, and some of the cobblestone street was even being damaged. A few lone persons were being teased and bullied by the Death Eaters, and one unlucky family was cornered by an imposing group of three large men, one of which had the family's father in the throws of the Cruciatus. That's where Harry headed next.

Harry's first spell was launched at the man holding the unforgivable curse, and the stunner knocked him out cold, causing the curse to end, but also alerting the other two men to Harry's presence. When they turned around, the two kids, no older than seven and ten, and the man's wife, dragged themselves into a nearby small side street to wait out the fight. Still searching for the person who had stunned their companion, Harry used the time wasted by the Death Eaters to levitate the remaining man to the safety of the alley with his family. He wasn't unconscious after just a short time of the pain curse, but he was still in no shape to move himself or even use his own wand.

Once that was out of the way, Harry turned his attention back to the two large men, and steadied himself for another fight. ‘No punches this time,’ he mentally reminded himself.

Directing his wand to the man on his right, Harry cast a permanent sticking charm on the cobblestone street. A second later the man stepped right into it, but the little warning he had caused him to fall right over. He did manage to get his hands up in time to break his fall, but the movement caused him to drop his wand, and it fell to the ground. Clattering across a few feet of open street, Harry was pleased to see that even with his arms fully outstretched, the man’s wand was still far out of reach. He wouldn’t be going anywhere soon.

Focusing his attention on the last of the three Death Eaters in the small group, Harry was unprepared for a jet of water that hit him directly in the face as he turned his back on his downed enemy. The third man, knowing that an enemy was near, but not being able to see him because of a invisibility cloak or disillusionment charm, had cast a large stream of water in a wide arc. The water didn’t do any damage, except maybe disorientate Harry, but the water’s resistance against the invisibility cloak gave away Harry’s position. Until the excess water finished dripping off the cloak, Harry was vulnerable.

Figuring out what had happened, Harry just managed to dive to the ground as a blood red light passed over his head. Not being familiar with that color curse, but not liking the looks of it either, Harry knew he had to finish off this man as quickly as possible, before others were alerted to his location. The next closest group of Death Eaters were across the street and four doors down, maybe about thirty five feet away, and so far only their own noisy curses had prevented Harry’s own fighting to be heard. Without the cover of his cloak, Harry might be able to hold off two or three attackers, but not the combined group of five that was nearby. He needed to incapacitate this last Death Eater, regain control of the situation, and then decide if he should risk more attempts at capturing Death Eaters, or apparate away with what he had so far.

Dropping his useless cloak on the ground, but still protected from identity by a hastily placed disillusionment charm, Harry lunged at the last man, casting a barrage of curses as fast as he thought of them.

Some were mild pain curses, others were just school yard jinxes, but all served to occupy the large man as he dodged and blocked the multi-colored lights coming from the end of Harry's wand.

The next moment, Harry got pushed from behind as a powerful stunner hit his back. Thankfully the spell sizzled out on his watch's shield spell and dragon hide armor, but Harry knew a second spell wouldn't do the same. Turning his attention around, Harry was surprised to see that the prone Death Eater had somehow managed to get his wand back. Spotting the nearby fallen flagpole, Harry knew how. Without another thought, Harry stunned the downed man, and turned back around to his more dangerous opponent just in time.

Deflecting a cutting curse back at the man, who ducked away at the last moment, Harry decided to use something a bit more powerful. He would never use something of its power in a school class or duel, but he wasn't in school right now, and he needed to end this fight quickly.

"Relashio!" Harry shouted. He had not used this particular spell in almost two years, when he scared off the grindylows during the Triwizard Tournament's second task. Then, underwater, Harry had only managed hot sparks to fend off the bothersome creatures. He knew however that the spell was capable of much more, and his results this time were just that.

A bright line of tightly braided red fire shot out the end of Harry's wand, and acted like a flame thrower. Harry didn't even have to recast the spell each time he wanted more fire either, he just waved his wand to let loose with a burst of flames, while his wand tip stayed lit and ready for another go.

The first shot of flames wasn't intended for any specific target, so it just flew past the Death Eater's left shoulder, harmlessly colliding with a stone wall. Surprised, the Death Eater turned his head to follow the fire, and so didn't see Harry's second attempt fly right towards his head. In fact, the man was unaware until the hot flames hit him right in the mask, which burnt and flaked away in just seconds. The white mask took the brunt of the spell's force, but Harry could immediately tell some damage had been done to the face behind it.

"My eyes! I can't see! My eyes are on fire!" He went on in the same tone, all while brandishing his wand like a sword in front of him, until Harry put him out of his misery. Just to make sure the Death Eater wasn't faking an injury, Harry used the "Avis" spell to conjure a flock of crows to fly at the man's face. Apart from shying away from the noisy flapping, the Death Eater showed no signs of seeing the birds, so Harry was pretty sure that the man was indeed blind. Whether it was a permanent condition or not, wasn't yet known. Personally, Harry didn't much care.

Casting a quick-dry spell on his cloak, Harry once again invisible, went back to unstuck the prone Death Eater, lying on the ground. The way permanent sticking charms worked, Harry had read, was that they couldn't be undone unless the caster knew the password originally used when placing the charm. Since the man hadn't heard Harry's spellwork, he was unable to get himself out of the bind, even once he had recovered his wand. Muttering the counter-curse, Harry collected the three unconscious men's wands, and levitated them back to his alley. They joined the first man on the floor in a sloppy heap of body parts, and Harry took the time to re-Stupefy all of them, as well as tying them up with conjured ropes. He didn't want to take any chances that these four Death Eaters could somehow break free of his spell, like Wormtail had done back in the bushes in front of Hermione's house. Harry still didn't know how that had happened, but wasn't willing to take another chance.

Convinced that the men were as subdued as could be under the circumstances, Harry took a deep breath and made back out into Diagon Alley. The night wasn't close to over yet, and the sudden pain in his head was only proof of that. Voldemort was up to something, and it wasn't good. Still, the pain was less than it had been earlier in the day, and Voldemort seemed farther away too. So after a few moments of deep breathing and Occlumency meditation, Harry continued on.

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Dessert was just being served as future Harry's scar erupted in a volcano of pain. He knew it was coming of course, as it had already happened to him once before, but that didn't lesson the hurt any.

Most of the surrounding students didn't notice though, as they were too busy fighting over the delicious portions of puddings, pies, tarts, and treats that had just appeared on golden platters. Not even Ron and Hermione noticed, although Neville and Ginny did. Harry was able to remove his hand from his head and open his eyes after just a moment, and through the pain, saw that two of his close friends had stopped eating. Plastering on a fake smile, Harry did the only thing he could do.

"Don't worry," he whispered to them, "the pain's fading. Just more of Voldemort being happy."

Neville nodded his head and seemed to accept the explanation, but Ginny wasn't as easy to convince. Looking to see that Hermione and Ron were now fighting over who got the last piece of pumpkin/pecan pie, she scowled at them, and turned her attention to the Head table. When Harry turned to follow her gaze, he was momentarily startled to see Dumbledore looking right back at him.

Professor Dumbledore, with a strange owl perched on his shoulder, had a written letter in his hands, and had no doubt just found out about the attack at Diagon Alley. He also might have seen Harry flinching at the pain from his scar, so to appear as if he too just found out about the attack, Harry pointed to his head, and mouthed the words, "Diagon Alley." From his previous exploits he had already known that's where Dumbledore and his agents would go. It was too bad that's not where Voldemort, or even his most trusted Death Eaters, were at. No, they were up to something much more sinister than destroying a few Diagon Alley storefront displays. But as much as Harry wanted to warn the Order of the Phoenix to ignore Diagon Alley and apparate to the site of the real trouble, he knew he wasn't able to. He'd already read the next day's paper, and knew what the story would say. It was impossible, no matter how much he wanted, to change the future he already knew would come to pass.

As soon as he had Harry's confirmation, Dumbledore gave a grim nod, and conversed quietly with Professors Snape and McGonagall, Hagrid, and Remus. He also had a quick meeting with Flitwick and Sprout, and then left through a side door unnoticed by the student body. Only Harry had noticed, and Ginny as well, because she was

watching what he was. Knowing that all the missing professors were Order of the Phoenix members, Ginny turned her attention back to Harry.

"Harry, what's going on? What did you just tell Professor Dumbledore?"

"Whaa?" Ron mumbled through a mouthful of pudding. Apparently his argument with Hermione was over with, or at least temporarily suspended until after dessert. Hermione too gave her attention to Harry, noticing that Dumbledore was gone after Ginny's statement.

Sighing heavily, and rubbing the last prickles of pain from his forehead, Harry explained the situation in hushed tones so others wouldn't be alerted to the possible danger.

"I just got another pain in my scar from Voldemort. He's happy again, and this time it's because Diagon Alley is being attacked. I just looked at Dumbledore and told him, so I imagine that's where he and the others disappeared too. I only hope that they can get there in time." Really, Harry didn't believe that. He already knew the outcome, and it wasn't one he wanted to dwell on. Still, the others would suspect something odd if Harry didn't show an optimistic outlook, so that's what he forced himself to present to them. They'd know the truth tomorrow anyway.

"Oh, no! I do hope they get there in time." Hermione exclaimed. Ginny and the others nodded in agreement, and Ron said something under his breath that Harry didn't manage to catch.

"What was that Ron?" he asked.

"I said," Ron repeated, "that I can't help but feel glad that Fred and George don't own a shop in Diagon Alley anymore. Knowing them, they'd get right in the middle of whatever trouble is going on, and it would just kill Mum to know her sons were fighting Death Eaters, or even worse yet, You-Know-Who himself!"

Ginny's face blanched as she heard what Ron was thinking, and for once in the past few months, had nothing witty to respond with to her

brother's comments. Hermione had plenty to say though, and she let everyone know her thoughts on the subject.

"Even if they don't have a shop there anymore, doesn't mean that they won't show up to defend Diagon Alley, Ron. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore contacted Order members, after all. And while I know the twins aren't official yet, they do go on some missions. If they heard about the attack, through you mum or even Bill or Charlie, I'm sure they'd apparate into the middle of a fight in a heartbeat, regardless of whether they were ordered to go or not. That's just the type of impulsiveness the twins like to show."

Ron was just staring at Hermione with bugged out eyes, and Harry couldn't blame him. While being very insightful and even probably true, Hermione's statement about the twins wasn't too tactful. Sometimes she just didn't bother to think her thoughts through before letting herself run off at the mouth.

"Ron," Ginny whispered, "you don't think Fred and George would really do something that dangerous, do you?" Harry could tell she was very worried for her older brothers at the moment. Not just the twins either, but Bill and Charlie as well. Not to mention her parents. Ginny and Ron just had no way to know which of their family would be involved. Harry wished he could comfort her, especially since he knew that none of her family would be hurt, but he couldn't explain such knowledge. He tried something else anyway.

"Ginny, I'm sure Fred and George, and any other Order members who might show up in Diagon Alley to fight, are more than prepared for what they'll face. They won't be the only ones there, and Dumbledore won't let anything happen to them. Besides, I'd be more afraid of Fred and George if I was a Death Eater, than anything else. With all their inventions and tricks up their sleeves, not to mention that they're not half bad at defense, the twins are more than a match for any dimwitted Death Eater."

Hermione, finally catching on to the blunder she had made, did the best she could to correct her mistake. "Yes Ginny. If anything, Fred and George are probably more able to defend themselves than a lot of the other Order of the Phoenix members. They'll probably end up

saving Tonks when she trips over her own feet, or something like that. You'll see. And that's even if they show up at all. Most likely they'll just spend the night turning each other into canaries, or some such rubbish. I wouldn't worry."

Ginny looked a little better at Harry and Hermione's ensuing words, as did Ron. Neville was just following the conversation closely, but had nothing really to add. He had also abandoned the last of his dessert plate, as he had lost his appetite while hearing about Voldemort's attack. The others all followed suit, even Ron, and pushed their plates away.

Soon enough, the dessert plates were cleared, and the squeaky voice of Professor Flitwick addressed the crowd. He must have been left in charge while Dumbledore was gone.

"Attention students! Professor Dumbledore had to attend an emergency meeting with the Minister in his office, but he informed me he wishes all of you a happy Halloween, and to enjoy the rest of the night. As a special treat, all prefect patrols will be taken over by the staff for tonight, so feel free to do as you please, as long as you're all still in your common rooms before curfew. That is all; and have a pleasant evening."

After the group of younger years headed out the doors to return to their common rooms, Harry and his group followed morosely. None had anything to say, and if not for a rude interruption in the Entrance Hall, the whole trip probably would have been made in silence.

"What's the matter Potter, you're looking a little troubled tonight? Had a bad piece of pumpkin pie, perhaps?" Harry hadn't talked to the boy in weeks, but Draco's superior sounding voice was apparent. Clearly, he was fishing for a response.

"Go away, Draco. Nobody here wants to talk to you." As Harry answered, he tried to herd his friends up the main staircase, not wanting to have to break up another fight that it looked like Ron was itching to get into.

"Well, I don't want to particularly talk to you either. It's just that I'm just in such a good mood. You know; it being a holiday and all. Why, I expect that many great things are happening tonight. I know my father is awfully busy with his many parties. What about you, Potter? Is your father going to any Halloween parties tonight?"

Harry's anger was boiling now, and Hermione and Ginny were doing their best to hold back Ron, who was cursing up a storm. Harry knew damned well where Draco's father was that night, and it sounded like Draco knew even more than he was letting on about. He'd have to investigate that more later. But now he just wanted to get rid of the bullying git.

"Oops, I'm sorry," Draco mocked apologized. "I forgot, you don't have a father anymore. In fact, didn't he die this very night? Why yes, I'm sure he did. I wonder if that's the party my father's at right now. Celebrating the death of such a worthless excuse for a pureblood."

Malfoy made a few other comments, but Harry didn't hear as it was drowned out by the boy's insistent laughter. Nearby Crabbe and Goyle joined in too, although they had to be prompted by Draco to start. Clearly, they didn't know what they were laughing at.

Harry was furious now. If he could he'd deduct house points from the Slytherin trio for making such jokes he would have, but technically speaking, they hadn't broken any school rules. Still, Harry couldn't let them get away with this.

Raising his right arm, wand already in hand, Harry cast a silencing charm over all three. Draco responded immediately, but his lack of voice preventing him from executing his intended spell. There were spells of course that could be used without a vocal incantation, but they were few, and the time it took Draco to think of one was all the time Harry needed to act.

Summoning their wands away from them, Harry then transfigured their robes into tight body suits. Draco's was a soft pink color, while Crabbe and Goyle had violent shades of purple and yellow.

Surprised by the move, and embarrassed by their new wardrobe, the three tried to cover themselves, looking for an escape exit. Draco had started to sprint to the dungeon's entrance, when Harry caught him in a levitation spell. Crabbe and Goyle just looked on confused, not knowing what to do.

"See Hermione," Harry said pleased, "Wingardium Levi-O-sa. Even after all these years, I still remember your advice."

Hermione had dropped her grip on Ron by now, and wanted nothing more than to lecture Harry about abusing his prefect responsibilities. However, her encyclopedia-like mind had to first correct Harry's mistake.

"But Harry," she called out from halfway up the stairs, "that spell isn't to be used with live animals. It's unpredictable! You're supposed to use 'Mobilicorpus' instead in this situation."

Harry, who was enjoying swinging Malfoy around the Entrance Hall, suspended twenty feet in the air, had a disturbing grin on his face. "Oh really, I didn't know that. Thanks for the tip. Did you know that Draco?"

Draco, who was too busy loosing his dinner up in the air, didn't respond. Neither did Crabbe or Goyle, who were doing a poor job of dodging the vomit Draco was spewing on them from above.

"I guess that explains why I'm having such a hard time controlling Draco. Do you reckon' I should stop and switch to Mobilicorpus, or should I just manage with what I've already cast?" Draco had just bounced off the large oak doors to the outside, and had a purple mark forming on his delicate pale cheek. No doubt, he had plenty of other bruises as well from Harry's rough treatment.

"Nah, give him another fly around the room, Harry! This is the most brill thing I've ever seen. This tops the bouncing ferret even." Ron was cheering Harry on now, as were Neville and Ginny. Luna said nothing, while Hermione just gave Harry her "McGonagall" face.

Knowing he'd gone far enough, Harry lowered the spinning Draco right onto his two goons, and they all ended in a pile of limbs on the floor. There was mess everywhere, and with a quick wave of his wand and a muttered "Evanesco," the sick was gone. The only bits that remained were what was plastered all over the three Slytherins' body suits. And it wasn't a small amount either.

"Come on, let's go upstairs." Harry called out to his friends. Draco and the others posed no more threat, and Harry's group climbed their stairs to Gryffindor tower. Hermione continued her lecture, and before she would quiet Harry promised to turn himself into a staff member the next day for punishment. It's not like Malfoy wouldn't complain to Snape about the treatment, so really it was unavoidable. Still, hopefully Draco had learned his lesson about messing with Harry, and wouldn't be so quick to anger him again.

Luna parted from the group on the fourth floor, and once past the Fat Lady's portrait, the remaining five friends sat in their customary seats around the fire. Ron was bouncing up and down, replaying the recent events for Dean and Seamus's entertainment, and Harry was content to just sit back and be a spectator.

A glance at his watch told him that the real Harry would be returning from Diagon Alley soon though, and he needed to get ready. He'd have his hands full once he returned, and he started to make his excuses early.

"I think I'm going to head up to bed early tonight," Harry told his friends. "I'm still tired from earlier today, and playing with Draco really took it out of me. I'll see you all in the morning."

Ron and Neville, now engaged in a chess game, bid him good night, as did Hermione and Ginny, who were both bent over the same book. What it was, Harry didn't know, but he didn't have time to find out either.

Harry whistled to the corner of the room, where Hedwig was perched. "Come on girl, come up with me why don't you?" Silently, he added so only she could hear, "You've got some work to do tonight, girl."

Hedwig, now weeks after her arrival, had finally reached a level of disinterest so that she could spend most of her time either on her perch in Harry's dorm room, or in the populated Gryffindor common room. The Gryffindors were so accustomed to her that she wasn't a bother anymore. The rest of the school however couldn't say the same. So as much as she wanted to spend time with Harry, Hedwig wasn't allowed in classes or at meals unless she was delivering a letter. And since Harry had so few people to write, that didn't happen often.

Still, he spent time with her every afternoon when he went down into his trunk to practice with his other self. Hedwig always accompanied Harry then, as well as spent time in his library whenever he was doing his extra studying. 'It's not much different than Fawkes's schedule,' Harry thought, 'as I hardly see the bird outside of Dumbledore's office either. Maybe it's just not practical to have a phoenix follow you everywhere you go.'

As if she knew what Harry was thinking, Hedwig gave a sharp nip to Harry's ear, causing him snap out of his thoughts.

"Sorry girl, I know you'd like to get out more. I'll see what I can do. Maybe you can spend some time with Hagrid, and he can teach his classes about white phoenixes. I'll ask him next time we have tea."

That seemed to satisfy Hedwig, who flew over to her perch the second Harry entered the dorm room. He was all alone, and after another look at his watch, cast a strong locking charm at the door, as well as a silencing charm around the room. Any minute now, they'd have company, and Harry would almost rather deal with Aunt Marge.

"Get ready Hedwig, he'll be here shortly. I only hope things went as planned."

Not a second after Harry finished, a bloody body appeared in the center of the room, limbs twisted at an unnatural angle. Loose strips of black fabric hung off the male in stained tatters, and Harry had no problems identifying who the injured mass of flesh and bone was. It was himself.

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After depositing the three newest captures with his first, Harry returned to find that the remaining Death Eaters were no longer attacking or causing destruction. Instead, they had grouped in the center of the town, right in front of Gringott's, and were all pointing their wands in the sky. Not liking the looks of this at all, Harry let loose a tirade of curses, but not one of them hit their intended target. It seemed the group, at least twenty in number, were behind some sort of protection spell or ward, and nothing could get through. Harry was sure it could be broken with enough time and research, but right now the only thing that came to mind was an Unforgiveable. And even if Harry was able to use the forbidden curses on himself to build up a tolerance, he wasn't about to use them on anyone else. He'd tried that before on Bellatrix Lestrange, thank you very much, and he hadn't liked the feeling it left afterwards at all. The fact that they were all illegal didn't help.

Wondering what was maintaining the shield's power, as all Death Eaters were pointing their wands to the sky, Harry almost missed the silent "pops" that appeared all around him. In fact, if not for his invisibility cloak, he would have been spotted immediately by Professor McGonagall, as she was the closest. The Order of the Phoenix had finally arrived, and right behind them were a dozen or so aurors.

Knowing his own weakness, Harry spotted Moody and his magical eye across the town, and maneuvered himself so that buildings and people were between the two. Harry knew that he couldn't totally prevent the aged auror from seeing him, but hopefully he wasn't looking. Instead, Moody should have his attention turned to the center of town, where all the action was.

Besides Moody and McGonagall, Remus, Hagrid, Snape, Tonks, Kingsley, Amos Diggory, Mr. Weasley, Bill, the twins, Dung, and Hestia Jones were also present from the Order. Not to mention Dumbledore, who was the first to decipher the Death Eater's intentions. He didn't even bother to try to break down the barrier around them, almost as if he knew it was pointless.

"Everyone, quick! They're activating a portal. Work in teams, and be prepared. They could be bringing anything through a portal that size."

Skimming through all knowledge in his head, Harry recognized the term "portal" from his earlier Hogwarts years. It was an advanced charm they had learned about in both Charms class and History, but have never learned how to perform. Apparently, it was used to move large numbers of people or objects when apparition couldn't be used. Apparition only worked with witches and wizards, and even forced apparition could only take at most two additional passengers. And that needed a very powerful caster. No, portals were weaker and less predictable than apparition, and seldom used just for those reasons. Those, and the fact that it took the simultaneous spell casting of at least five wizards to create even a small portal, is the reason why it was an almost an extinct method of travel. Still, a portal created by so many wizards would be large, and Harry was starting to see why Dumbledore was getting so nervous.

Moving into position so he was at Moody's back, far away from the action, but still close enough to see what was happening, Harry found out moments later when a ten foot wide portal appeared in the air above the Death Eater's heads. At first nothing happened, and some of the Order members and aurors breathed a sigh of relief. The Ministry aurors weren't surprised or shocked at the Order's presence, so Harry guessed that they'd been briefed ahead of time to expect the help.

Sighs of relief however soon turned into gasps of horror, as dozens of dark robed creatures poured out of the portal. They floated down to the ground in a dispersed pattern as Harry had seen before, and immediately coldness and despair flooded the night's air.

'Damn him!' Harry thought of his future self. 'Why didn't he warn me this would happen?' Harry didn't have much time to think anything else, as already groups of Dementors approached the stunned and defenseless aurors and Order of the Phoenix members. The only defense against the creatures, the Patronus Charm, was difficult at best to cast, even for an adult wizard. Of the twenty or so aurors and Order members present, Harry didn't think more than half would be able to protect themselves. There was also the group of Death Eaters

to worry about, as they had stopped their chanting, and had turned their attention back to the fight. The barrier that protected them seemed to block the Dementors' effects as well as curses, but it didn't prevent them from hurling their own.

It was Remus's wolf patronus that Harry recognized first, and launched him into action. Already things were too desperate, and the few aurors who couldn't cast patronus were hiding behind those that could. They were also rapidly casting shield charms, to deflect the endless stream of spells coming from the Death Eaters. Still, they stayed protected behind their large barrier.

Seeing a few more patroni join in with Remus's wolf, Harry thought it was safe to cast his own. In a sea of so many animals, another silver totem wouldn't be noticed. Remus's wolf, Professor McGonagall's giraffe (??), and Dumbledore's swarm of bumblebees were holding the largest group of seven Dementors at bay. The only other patroni Harry noticed was a bat that belonged to Snape, and a bear, a moose, and a penguin that came from the aurors. Those were herding the other two large groups of Dementors, but there were still at least ten of the evil creatures left unchecked to do their own bidding.

"Expecto Patronum!!!" Harry yelled, pointing towards the next largest group of Dementors. Honestly, after so much practice with this particular charm, Harry wasn't expecting anything special. Too bad Harry forgot he had a nasty habit of standing out. For where in years past the silver form of Prongs leaped out of his wand tip, this time it was a much larger, golden version of his father's animagus form that joined the battle.

Worried that he'd be discovered by his use of the unique advanced charm, Harry swore and looked around frantically. No one seemed to notice his lone patronus tearing into the Dementors, killing them off instead of just scaring them away. It was because of his frenzied looking in every direction that Harry caught sight of another Prongs, winking up at him from his tattooed forearm. The guardian tattoo of his father had traveled from his normal shoulder blade position, for the first time that Harry had seen.

"What the hell?" Harry blurted out. In response, the tattoo just winked again, and then turned back to watch the action. Already half of the Dementors were destroyed, and the surviving Order members and aurors were turning their attention back to the Death Eaters. Not knowing what was happening to their allies, they started to pace nervously.

'So that's why I'm able to cast a gold patronus!' Harry's mind was running a mile a minute now. 'It's because of the guardian tattoos. Or rather, tattoo. It makes sense that Prongs would have something to do with me casting a powerful patronus, but that has nothing to do with my Padfoot or Lily tattoos. I bet they'll have their own, unique powers. I'll have to research this more later. I've got to cover my tracks now. No doubt Remus recognizes Prongs, and that's how he knows I'm here. I'll have to talk to him quick before I leave. He'll have to make up some explanation to give the others. They can't know that I was here.'

Only six Dementors remained now, and between his golden patronus, and the seven silver ones, they didn't stand a chance. Quickly, while the groups' attention was still on them, Harry ran to Remus's side to have a quick conversation. Luckily, he was alone.

"Remus! Quick, listen to me, I don't have a lot of time," he whispered in the man's ears.

Remus's ears perked up at Harry's first word, and his nostrils flared too. He werewolf sense at work, no doubt. "Harry?" He questioned. "I thought that was Prongs. What are you doing here? And where the bloody hell are you?"

"Shusssh, I don't have much time. I'll meet you tomorrow after breakfast in your office to explain more. But for now, can you make up some excuse about the golden patronus? The others can't know I'm here; especially Dumbledore. Also, you need to get the released spirits, if there are any, to leave before they can be questioned. Tell them to head for the Shrieking Shack, and that there are others of their kind that will explain what's happened to them. Say anything

else you can think of, but I've got to go now. Moody can see through my invisibility cloak, and I can't risk that. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Harry, wait!"

Harry would have liked to go back, but he couldn't afford the extra time. All the Dementors were destroyed now, and the Death Eaters were disapparating away before Dumbledore could break through the shield, which he was attempting now. Already they had cast a large Dark Mark in the air, and some of the scared people who had been attacked earlier were coming out of hiding. The street would be filled with reporters and photographers soon, and Harry didn't want to risk detection.

Walking back to his base alley, Harry's mind was spinning with the possibilities of his other two guardian tattoos' powers. He'd have to spend a lot of time in his trunk experimenting, but now that he knew how one of them worked, Harry had no doubt discovering the rest was just a matter of time.

With his wand re-holstered, and his head in the clouds, it was no wonder that Harry fell easily to a lone Death Eater's curse. It was only Impedimenta, but it still left Harry in a very vulnerable spot.

'Damn!' he swore silently, because his mouth couldn't move. 'I forgot to renew the shield spell on my watch after it dissipated.' Still, Harry was dressed in dragon hide armor, and the clothes' protection allowed him to move at about half speed. The Death Eater was no fool though, and after seeing that Harry was still moving, recast the same spell multiple times. Harry was frozen in place now, and wasn't going to break free anytime soon.

"Accio cloak! Well well, what do we have here? The famous Harry Potter, out and about in a dark alleyway all alone. Oh, how my master will be pleased. And what's more, you have a valuable invisibility cloak that you want me to have. Why thank you Harry, I'll be sure to make good use of it."

Still hung on his shoulders, the cloak had flown off Harry into the waiting hands of the Death Eater. This man wasn't as slow or stupid

as the others, and Harry even recognized who it was. It was Avery, one of Voldemort's inner circle. But still, how was he able to see Harry with his father's cloak on?

To answer his question, Avery went on to describe how brilliant and deductive he was to notice something was wrong, after discovering that four of his number were missing. In true James Bond villain style, he explained how he'd been left behind in the shadows, to regulate the shield spell the other Death Eaters were protected behind. It was an advanced spell given to them by their master, but required one caster to be outside the protection it offered. And so deep in the shadows, hidden away from the Dementors, Order members, and aurors, Avery had noticed that a few were missing from his group. When the Dementors proceeded to be destroyed, he knew something was definitely amiss, and started to scan the area with a variety of spells. It was a lucky chance that one of those spells happened to be a heat seeking spell, designed purposely to detect hidden prey while hunting. Not knowing who was hidden, but only caring that they were alone and had their back to his position, Avery had cursed the unknown assailant in hopes of learning what had happened to his comrades.

"Now Harry, tell me where the others are, and how you destroyed the Dementors, and I'll reward you by killing you quickly. My master will be most displeased that he hadn't the honor to himself, but will understand. If you don't tell me what I want to know, I can't say he'll show you the same forgiveness."

Eyes wide open, scanning the immediate area, Harry was panicked to learn that nobody was nearby. All the action was on the other side of town, where aurors were dispersing the Dark Mark. Nearby Harry could see the four Death Eaters still unconscious in a piled heap, but the notice-me-not charms he'd placed earlier didn't allow Avery to see the same.

"I won't tell you shit!" Harry spat out in a rage. More than Avery, he was angry at himself for being caught so easily. If only he recast the shield charm, or put off thinking about his guardian tattoos till after he was out of danger. But no, he went and got nabbed in the middle of the street, and still couldn't think of a way to save himself.

Avery only smiled when Harry cursed him. It really was a perverse smile. "Wrong answer, Harry. Crucio!"

Pain shot up his back, and spread throughout Harry's limbs. It wasn't as painful as Voldemort's curse, or even his own, but it still was no walk in the park. And because he was frozen in place, Harry couldn't collapse or flex his muscles, which hurt even worse. At least he didn't scream. If he did, Avery would no doubt find some sort of sick pleasure from it.

After about a minute, much shorter than even Harry's daily sessions with the Cruciatus, Avery stopped. He repeated the question one more time, and stepped back in shock when Harry opened his eyes and clearly said, 'Go to hell! I'm not telling you anything!"

It took a second for him to recover, but Avery continued on. "Well, it seems that you're familiar with this curse, Mr. Potter. How interesting. Perhaps in the future we'll see just how long you can stand before you mind starts to drip out your ears. Still, there are other ways to make you talk. I myself am not even very fond of the Cruciatus. I favor other, more enjoyable pastimes."

Harry didn't even have time to wonder what Avery was babbling about when he felt hot knives pass over his shoulders and upper arms. And it wasn't the hot knives feeling of the Cruciatus either; it was the real deal.

Biting his lower lip, refusing to scream out or make a sound, Harry turned his attention back to Avery, and saw the man had a conjured knife sticking out the end of his wand. It was glowing red hot, and he had just raked it across the upper part of Harry's back. Thankfully his armor vest had prevented any damage to his torso, but Harry's exposed shoulders both received long slash marks. They weren't too deep or damaging, but because of the red hot blade, they were mighty painful.

Avery continued in the same manner for awhile. He'd make a few cuts to Harry's legs, arms, or torso, and then repeat his question. Each time Harry refused to scream, and each time he refused to

answer. It was only because of the dark black shirt he wore that Avery didn't notice Harry's dragon hide armor vest underneath, which prevented all of the damage to his torso. Only his arms and legs were marked by the red hot blade, and besides burning and causing a loss of blood, they were mostly superficial.

After ten minutes of this treatment (Diagon Alley was empty still, thanks to an evacuation order Harry had heard made by the aurors), Harry was still stubbornly refusing to talk, and Avery was getting angry. Or more specifically, he was pissed.

"Why you troublesome little brat! You've lost your chance now. I'll just have to turn you over to my master, and then you'll know true pain. A week from now, you'll be sorry you didn't let me end your life. A month from now, you'll be begging to see me. Don't forget this Potter! Don't forget, when my master makes you feed your own body parts to his pet snake. Accio wands!"

Harry wasn't listening to Avery rant; instead he was trying to figure out a way to escape. But when Avery called for his wands, Harry freaked. Without his wands, he'd be helpless! In the heat of the moment, Harry had forgotten that his wands were in dragon hide holsters, and couldn't be summoned that way.

"Won't work, huh? You must have some of those auror wand holsters, then. No matter. Accio wand holsters!"

Why hadn't Harry thought of that? This time, his wand holster did unravel from his right forearm, and flew into Avery's waiting hands. His boot holster did the same, now only leaving Harry with his dagger. Momentarily, Harry wondered why he wasn't freed of that too, or why he was even being disarmed if he was so securely frozen. What Harry didn't realize, at least not yet, was that Avery assumed that both holsters on his forearm were for wands. And when two holsters flew into his hands (he didn't see the one come from Harry's boot), he was satisfied. From his position behind Harry's right shoulder, he couldn't see the dagger still strapped to Harry's left wrist.

"I'm going to release you now. I've got a hidden portkey nearby, and we're going to march over there nice and easy. I can't float you

through the street without being noticing by the aurors, so you're going to walk in front of me. Try anything funny though, and you'll be sorry. Understand?"

Harry couldn't believe Avery was being so stupid. If he had any smarts, he'd leave Harry frozen, and float his with a Mobilicorpus spell under cover of the invisibility cloak. Still, Avery wasn't used to having the cloak at his disposal, so maybe that's why he didn't think of it. Harry sure wasn't going to correct him. If he was unfrozen, he'd have a chance at escaping. And with his dagger at hand, he might just pull it off. It would have to be quick though, before Harry tired out. The Cruciatus and cutting he'd endured by Avery had taken a lot out of him, not to mention the blood loss. Once the Impedimenta spell was lifted, Harry didn't even know if he would be able to stay on his feet. Yet, he had to try.

"I said, understand?" Avery repeated. Harry had been to busy thinking of an escape to answer the first time, but he managed now.

"Understood. You'll have to move me slowly though, I'm not sure if I can walk." Harry said. Avery mumbled something about moving as fast he wanted to, but Harry didn't really care. Already, he was straining his arms and legs to move how he wanted to. Hopefully the second the spell was lifted, Harry could act.

And that's just what happened. Still about two feet behind Harry's right shoulder, Avery lifted the curse, and wasn't prepared for Harry's sudden movements. Taking a step back with his right foot as if it were spring loaded, Harry's right elbow also launched an attack that landed right below Avery's chin; glancing off his left check. The shot was sloppy and off target, but gave Harry the time he needed by startling his opponent.

Pivoting with his left foot this time, Harry raised his left arm in a fist, swinging it in a wide reverse arc. His hope was to nail Avery in the face at Harry turned to face his capture. The backhand swing wasn't as effective as other blows he could think of, but under the circumstances, it was the best Harry could mange. Just from the first elbow, he was already winded.

Turning away from Avery and completely around in a circle, Harry was surprised to find the Death Eater not where he expected him to be. Obviously, the elbow hadn't done as much damage as Harry had hoped, and Avery had responded by taking a step to the left, and brought his wand up to curse Harry. A green light flew through the space where Harry's head was a second ago, right behind his neck, and it was a good thing Harry's didn't even see it. Such a close call might have disturbed his concentration. Instead Harry continued swinging his left arm, intending his closed fist to connect with Avery's skull. But because Avery was no longer in place, Harry knew he would miss, and made a last minute change in plans.

Instead of using his fist, it was Harry's forearm that made a connection with Avery. Avery was too close, and if Harry bent his elbow, he'd lose all the power of a straight arm. So instead he lowered his blow, and caught Avery right across the throat. The blow didn't hurt Harry as much as he thought it would, and that's when he realized the hard metal of his dagger had done most of the damage. Still incased in its sheath, the dagger's hilt had landed right on Avery's windpipe, crushing it and leaving a nasty red welt.

Avery had backed away when he'd been hit, and was too hurt to even consider launching an attack of his own. Harry backed away too, to put some extra space between himself and the Death Eater. Although he was hurt, Harry was sure that Avery was still dangerous. Maybe more so now than before, because he'd been injured.

"Why you little prick!" Avery croaked out. It sounded nothing like his normal voice, and Harry could tell it was causing him an awful amount of pain just to talk.

Reaching across with his right hand, Harry drew his dagger and pointed it at Avery. It was still as sharp and as lethal looking as the day he had bought it.

"I hit you across the throat with this. Hurt, doesn't it? I wonder if you'll ever sound the same." Harry said coolly. Then he mocked Avery. "Then again, maybe you should thank me for going so easy on you. When your master finds out you had me in your grasp, but let me go, I doubt he'll be so....what was the word you used....ah yes, forgiving."

Rage poured out of the man's eyes, and Harry could tell that he was about to cast something particularly vicious. Not wanting to gamble if the man could enunciate the curse well enough for it to work, Harry immediately dove to the ground, doing a summersault towards Avery as a jet of rusty yellow passed him overhead. From the color spell, and the incantation he heard, it was a good thing that Harry did dive. Avery had used a bone shattering curse, Skelodestructo. It painfully destroyed any bone the light beam hit, and left the muscle behind in ruin. If it hit the ribcage or head, it could easily kill a man. And Avery had been aiming straight for Harry's scar.

Coming out of his summersault, Harry saw that he was right behind Avery's feet, and the Death Eaters had swung his head around to follow his path. Avery's mistake though, had been leaving his legs in a vulnerable position. And Harry took advantage immediately, swiping out with his blade, catching both ankles right above the rim of Avery's shoes.

"Arghhhh!" Harry heard loudly as he weakly got to his knees. The dive he did to escape the bone shattering curse had done something funny to his left shoulder, and it hung loosely at his side. What's more, Harry barely had enough energy to even stand, and Avery was still a threat. His cut Achilles tendons had brought him to the ground, but his wand was still in hand, and he was still mighty pissed.

Things finally went Harry's way though, as Avery dropped his wand to grasp at his feet, and totally forgot about Harry's presence. Still on his knees, Harry crawled over behind Avery and knocked him unconscious. Not having his wand back yet, he had to improvise. Bringing the hilt of his dagger down on Avery's skull full force worked just as well as a Harry's most powerful stunner.

Thankful that the night was finally over with, Harry struggled to find his wands and cloak in Avery's pockets. He then levitated the crippled man to the dark alley to join the others, and crawled over himself. Harry just didn't have the energy to stand, and he barely made it to his hideout before aurors came by to investigate the curses they had heard.

"There's nothing here," Harry heard from one man. Another responded, "It must be further down, let's go take a look."

It was a good thing Harry cast those notice-me-not charms on the alley. They'd only last for a couple of hours at the most, and more powerful or skillful wizards could see right through them, but they had done their job. Apparently they had worked on the two aurors, and though they didn't know it, they only moved on so quickly because an odd sense that what they were looking for wasn't close told them to.

Recasting stunning spells on all five Death Eaters, Harry enlarged his trunk and pushed them all inside the seventh compartment. Once done, Harry shrunk it back down to size, and re-pocketed the tiny luggage. It was getting hard to concentrate now, and Harry noticed small dark blurs entering his field of vision.

The last two things he needed to do before leaving was dissipate the anti- apparition wards and notice-me-not charms. Luckily taking down the anti- apparition wards was much easier than putting them up, and Harry only had to repeat the spell twice before it worked. The notice-me-not- charms were more difficult, and after four attempts Harry still hadn't managed.

He didn't know why it wasn't working, and he didn't know why the dark spots in his vision were getting bigger and bigger.

"Oh bloody hell!" Harry cursed himself once he figured it out. "I'm starting to black out."

Knowing that he couldn't be found passed out in the middle of the street, Harry left the charms in place and just trusted that they would fade to nothing in a few hours. Hopefully nobody would discover them in that time.

Apparating away, as he'd planned, was also out of the question. Harry didn't have the strength to even attempt it, and even if he did, he'd most likely splinch some part of himself in his injured condition. Luckily he had a backup.

A small stone in his pant's pocket acted as a portkey, and it was a good thing that Harry had thought of this as back up. Different then the portkey on his watch which would take him to his home, this one would transport him right to his dorm room, where hopefully his double would be waiting with medical attention. Now he knew why Dobby and Winky would be around. And if any of his dorm mates happened to be in the dorm room still so early in the night, then he'd just have to worry about that later. Once he was better, Harry could obviate them as needed. Assuming he would survive the night, that is.

Trying to dig the portkey out of his pocket with his limp arm, Harry perhaps for the first time realized how hurt he really was. Exposed to the Cruciatus for over a minute, then cut and tortured for ten minutes by a sadist Death Eater, which had accounted for an extreme loss of blood. Then he'd hurt his arm in that dive he'd done to dodge a curse, not to mention the beating his body had endured while he pummeled Avery with his arms, and the limited Dementor exposure he had suffered.

On the edge of consciousness, Harry finally managed to pop the small portkey out of his pocket and close his working fist around it. With his trunk in his back pocket, and his wand holsters cradled in his lap, Harry just managed to utter "activate" before the black spots completely enveloped his vision. Another ten seconds, and Harry wouldn't have made it.

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The next morning, Harry woke up sore and tired. Still, it was necessary to make an appearance at breakfast, to show Dumbledore and the others that nothing was wrong. He had a meeting to attend with Remus also, and that was a conversation that couldn't wait.

Skipping his normal workout routine and shower, Harry beat Ron and the others down to the Great Hall, and poured himself a bowl of cereal and began to eat. He didn't realize how hungry he was until after finishing the second bowl, but it did make sense. He'd skipped lunch the day before in anticipation of the Halloween Feast, and he'd

never seen that either. It had been a full twenty four hours since he'd last had a meal.

"Harry, I wonder if you might join me for a moment while you wait for your friends?" Harry dropped his spoon in his cereal bowl when Professor Dumbledore surprised him from behind. Harry didn't want to talk right now, as he was still painfully injured, but saw no escape. None of his friends, or even the Quidditch team was down at breakfast yet, and because it was a Sunday, they wouldn't be anytime soon.

And so Harry followed his headmaster out of the Great Hall, up the familiar path, to the circular office hidden behind the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore immediately took up his seat behind the desk, and Harry didn't even wait for the invite to sit down. After such a long journey, he needed his rest, and Dumbledore seemed to notice.

'Are you feeling alright, Harry? You seem to be suffering some pain this morning.'

Harry grimaced. He'd hoped to keep his pains to himself. "I'm alright, sir. Just sore from yesterday's pains, plus I didn't sleep well. I'm sure I'll feel better by tomorrow."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, and went on to say. "Yes Harry, the pain you suffered through your scar yesterday is what I wanted to talk to you about. We didn't get the time to meet ourselves, but your friends informed me that you suffered from an attack while in town yesterday afternoon. Could you please elaborate?"

"There's not much else to say, really. I was drinking butterbeer with the others, and then out of nowhere, I sensed that Voldemort was excited about something happening. Anxious, really. At first I thought he was happy, but that was only a first impression. It was more like he was looking forward to something. After my second spell last night at the feast, it makes sense that he was happy about Diagon Alley being attacked. I just wish that I could have given you more warning."

It was a long time before Dumbledore replied, and when he did, it was to ask Harry if he'd like any tea or lemon drops. Harry politely

refused, and remembering his last trip to Honeydukes, called out in the air, "Hedwig could you come here for a moment please?"

A moment later Hedwig burst into the room in white and gold flames, and perched on Harry's outstretched arm. She gave a curious look over to Fawkes, perched in his usual spot, who only gave a curious look back.

"Hedwig, can I ask you a favor?" Harry's voice brought the female phoenix's attention away from her counterpart. "Can you bring me the yellow bag of Warheads that I bought yesterday? They should be on my bedside table, in a larger bag of sweets. If you can't separate just the yellow bag, bring them all, and I'll do it."

Hedwig sniffed her nose as if insulted, and a second later, disappeared in another burst of flames. While she was gone, Dumbledore turned his attention back to Harry.

"Warheads, Harry? Aren't those a little dangerous to have lying around your dorm room? If my understanding of muggle technology is correct, you shouldn't even have access to such devices."

Harry just laughed. "Not those type of warheads, Professor. These are a type that you'll enjoy, I'm sure, but are still just as dangerous. Just wait, and you'll see."

He didn't have to wait long, because Hedwig returned just at that moment. In her talons she had the single bag of yellow lemon Warheads, which she neatly deposited in Harry's awaiting lap. Once done with her task, she turned back to face Fawkes again, who was trilling a slow and peaceful greeting.

"Oh, that's right. You haven't met Fawkes yet, have you Hedwig? Why don't you go over and say hi? I'm sure he won't mind. Next to you, he's the nicest phoenix I know."

The old man laughed at Harry's encouragement, and Fawkes nodded his head as if to agree. So Hedwig warily flew over to share his grand perch, and the two had a quiet conversation in phoenix talk. Harry couldn't remember off hand if Hedwig had ever met Fawkes before as

an owl, but for some reason he didn't think so. This was probably their first meeting.

"So Harry," the Headmaster brought him back out of his thoughts, "is that small bag the Warheads you talk about? I can't see them being much of a danger. Why, they look like a package of sweets."

"They are sweets, Professor. I bought them yesterday in town with you specifically in mind, and your offer of a lemon drop reminded me of them. They're like a super-sour lemon drop; not for the feint of heart though. Would you like to try one?" Harry couldn't help but tease his old mentor just a little. No one really could imagine how sour they were until the very first one, and almost always the individual puckered up their mouths and spit the candy into their hands. After the first time they were more enjoyable, but that first was always a surprise.

Naturally, Dumbledore couldn't resist a new lemon flavored candy, and his response was just what Harry was hopping for. After tearing the little foil packet open, and popping the dusty candy in his mouth, the mage's eyes got wide and teared as the first wave of sourness hit his taste buds. Next Dumbledore popped up out of his seat, and did a little jig as he waved his hands around his head. Harry was openly laughing now, and he could see that although Dumbledore was acting the part, he was quite enjoying himself too. Another twenty seconds later and the intense flavor part was over with, and the candy just tasted like a normal lemon sweet again. With a few last puckers and smacks of his lips, Professor Dumbledore returned to his seat to finish his treat.

"My word Harry, you weren't kidding when you said that those were still quite dangerous. That was the most delicious, sour and tart sweet I've ever had the pleasure of tasting. I wonder if you might allow me to purchase the remainder of this package from you. I can't wait to see Minerva or Severus's expression when I convince them to have one of these."

Harry laughed at the thought. He'd kill for a picture like that, of either McGonagall or Snape eating one of the sour sweets. "Actually, sir," Harry managed after ridding the images in his head, "I bought this

packet for you. I have others in my room. There are other flavors if you'd like to try that are on sale at Honeyduke's. I'm partial to cinnamon myself, but I know that you like lemon, and those are the most sour as well. Feel free to share them with whoever you like, but if you do manage to convince Professor McGonagall or Snape to have one, do you think I could visit your memory of that in a pensieve? That's my only price."

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to laugh, but he agreed, as long as Harry kept the secret to himself. The professors, especially Snape he said, wouldn't appreciate being made fun of.

While Dumbledore finished his candy, and Harry drank his tea, a silence filled the air, and Harry knew the conversation was about to return to unpleasant matters. Sure enough, a moment later they did.

Dumbledore steepled his hands under his chin, and held the pose a long time before he spoke. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Harry. Back to what you were saying before, even if you did manage to give us more of a warning, I doubt it would have done more good. While it was a good thing that we responded to the threat at Diagon Alley when we did, at the same time we missed the larger threat altogether. Now, I expect you to find out about this later this morning in the papers, but Voldemort himself attacked Azkaban last night as well, with some of his most trusted Death Eaters. It would seem that Diagon Alley was just a diversion, and it worked perfectly. I and most of the Order apparated to Diagon Alley to fight off the Death Eaters and Dementors with Ministry aurors, while Voldemort had free reign at Azkaban. Only when I realized the attack was a diversion, as very few people were injured, did I get a message that Azkaban was under attack. Unfortunately we were too late, and Voldemort was able to again free all his followers."

It was Harry's chance to take a long pause before he responded. "I can't say I surprised, really. After all, it does fit Voldemort's M.O. After the battle at the Ministry, while Malfoy and some of the others were let off by Fudge, Voldemort still had a good number of his high ranking Death Eaters locked back up. Now that the Dementors are no longer guarding the prison, but have sided with him, it's got to be

much easier to break in to Azkaban.” Harry paused again. “How’s the prison even guarded these days? Was anybody hurt in the attack?”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said seriously, “a team of sixteen aurors have guarded the prison since the Dementors have left. Four were killed, eleven were kissed, and only one was left unharmed. Voldemort himself had captured the auror in charge, and only let him live to spread the truth to others, so they’d know what had happened. Voldemort isn’t in hiding anymore, and this is very bad. I had hoped that he’d wait more patiently, possibly to make another attempt at finding out the prophecy from either you or me. It seems that he’s done waiting now, and that worries me. Not to mention the fact that last night’s attack marks the fifteen year anniversary of his initial defeat. I’m afraid that Voldemort will be attacking more openly from now on, and that is truly troubling.

Hearing Dumbledore’s thoughts mirror his own, Harry wondered what had changed so drastically that Voldemort had decided to launch an open attack. Last vision Harry had had, Voldemort was still trying to decide if he knew of the prophecy or not, and wasn’t making any plans to attack anybody. And it was odd too that just yesterday Harry had discussed these very reasons with his friends at the Three Broomsticks. Could one of them have somehow alerted Voldemort about his knowledge of the prophecy? No, that was ridiculous, wasn’t it?

“Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted his thinking again, “is there anything else you’d like to tell me about last night? Some of the staff noticed you behaving oddly, and there’s still some strange behavior I can’t explain. Perhaps you know something that could help me understand?”

Harry knew that if he hadn’t already proven himself an able Occlumens, that Dumbledore would no doubt be probing his mind right now. Last night he’d been as careful as possible to go unnoticed, but that damn golden patronus had messed everything up. Had Dumbledore seen? Harry thought he had turned his attention to the Death Eaters’ shield at that point. He could only hope Remus had come up with a believable story. Until he talked with him after breakfast, Harry would have to remain as vague as possible.

"No sir, nothing else. I was just a little on edge all night long, from my scar hurting. I'm sure you understand." The Headmaster only nodded. "Actually, there is something Professor. This isn't related really, but I promised Hermione that I'd turn myself in."

Eyes perked up by Harry's interesting confession, Dumbledore listened attentively as Harry explained how Draco had baited him into a conflict, and how he had responded. A twinkle shown in Dumbledore's eyes as Harry described using the wrong levitation spell on Draco on purpose, and the resulting effects it had had.

"I thought I should tell you sir, before Professor Snape has the chance to punish me. I dare say after our last conversation, he'd like nothing more than the chance to administer detentions. I know what I did was wrong though, so I won't argue over any punishment."

In the end, Dumbledore had applauded Harry for turning himself in when he could have just as easily gone unpunished. As such, he only had to serve two detentions with Hagrid, and only had thirty points deducted from Gryffindor. Harry knew that if it was Snape giving out demerits it would have been much more, and Harry was pleased. The thirty points could be made up easily enough in the next Quidditch match, and serving detention with Hagrid wasn't detention at all. It was more like being forced to spend time with a good friend.

Harry left a short while later to return to his breakfast and friends, only to notice that Hedwig didn't want to leave. She was enjoying herself too much with Fawkes, and after the sacrifices she had made last night for him, Harry didn't have the heart to order her away. Dumbledore found the situation amusing, and promised Harry that she could stay for awhile longer, and he'd be sure to send her on her way later in the day.

Back in the Great Hall, the student tables were almost completely filled, and their was a loud buzz going through the air. A quick look at the Ravenclaw table showed Harry that the Daily Prophet had already arrived, and the truth about Diagon Alley's attack and Azkaban's release was no doubt known. Harry reclaimed his seat among his friends to see their reaction to the news. It didn't look good.

"Oh Harry, you must feel horrible!" Hermione was almost in tears, and gave Harry a tight hug the moment he sat down. How odd...

"Hermione, it's OK. The attacks could have been a lot worse, and it was mostly superficial damage done to Diagon Alley. The escaped Death Eaters from Azkaban, while troublesome, wasn't really unexpected in my opinion. I don't understand why you're nearly crying." Harry tried to comfort the girl, but his attempts only made her worse. Unable to speak, Ginny had to continue.

"Harry," she asked, "have you actually read the papers yet? Do you know what's happened?"

Harry just gave her a strange look. "Well, no, but I have a pretty good idea. I saw it in my vision last night, and I just came from Dumbledore's office, where we discussed it all. I'm sure he knew more than are in the papers." 'Not to mention,' Harry thought, 'that I was bloody well there last night!'

"Harry, just read the article. I'm so sorry." Now Ginny had tears in her eyes, and she slowly pushed a copy of the paper across the table. Dreading what it might say to elicit such a reaction from his two friends, Harry read the front page.

**TWO ATTACKS LAST NIGHT!!!!  
DIAGON ALLEY THE DIVERSION, WHILE AZKABAN IS FREED BY  
YOU-KNOW-WHO HIMSELF!**

By Kendall Smiley

In a surprising and destructive attack last night, an estimated twenty to twenty five Death Eaters apparated to Diagon Alley and began causing havoc. Not there to target any single person or place, instead they just let loose with a deadly combination of spells and dark magic that stained the peaceful streets of our capital city. Storefronts were destroyed, holes were blown right out of the paved street, and a number of innocent people, young children among them, were tortured and played with as if mere pets.

Only when Ministry aurors and Albus Dumbledore, leading his own team of wizards showed up, did the Death Eaters fall back behind an impenetrable shield spell, clearly the work of strong dark magic.

Conflicting reports say that up to fifty Dementors were present as well, but the Ministry has yet to issue a conclusive report. Normally eyewitness accounts are good enough for such claims, but many present are swearing that they were kissed by Dementors, only to have their souls returned back to their bodies. There's also talk that Albus Dumbledore (Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards, and Headmaster of Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry) created a new spell that completely destroyed the reported Dementors. Much more powerful than the standard "Patronus Charm" that is only able to repel a Dementor, this new spell will be invaluable in the war effort, especially if it's able to return eaten souls to those unfortunate enough to of been kissed. (For a full account of the Dementor rumors and spell theories, see article on page thirteen.)

Still, while Dumbledore and Ministry forces were protecting Diagon Alley, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named himself was seen at Azkaban by head auror in charge of guards, Otto Musidora. "It was like looking into the face of pure evil," Musidora claims of coming face to face with You-Know-Who. "He only left me alive to make sure everyone knows that he's really back. He alone killed three of my team with a single curse, and another near dozen were kissed by Dementors he had with him. They didn't even affect him! It was like the Dementors were more afraid of him than he was of them. He's not human, I tell you! We didn't stand a chance!"

All of the Death Eaters recently recaptured last summer are once again

loose in England, so be on the lookout. A full page of mug shots and crimes committed by each is on page three. The fifteen aurors killed or kissed in action are listed on page twenty seven, along with the two Diagon Alley casualties, Peter Growkins (age one hundred fourteen, innocent shopping bystander, kissed by Dementor) and Amber Starr (age eighteen, Madam Malkin's robe shop employee, crushed to death under falling ruble).

Minister Fudge was unavailable for comment, but his staff....

Amber Starr, age nineteen! No; no it couldn't be. The article went on for another full page, but Harry lost all interest. He had been so caught up in the action last night, he hadn't even realized that there were any casualties. And Amber....oh no.

"I'm so sorry Harry, it's awful to find out this way." Hermione was still crying. She didn't know how close Harry and this Amber really were, but he had already lost enough people in this fight. How many more was he expected to loose? "If there's anything we can do...." Hermione didn't even know how to finish that, so she just left the offer hanging.

Next to her, Harry just sat stunned. It hadn't quite hit him yet, and he couldn't believe that he'd lost yet another person close to him. But the proof was right there in front of him, in black and white. She was really gone.

"Oh no, Amber! I'm so sorry...."

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#### AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, here you go. I know it's not as soon of an update as I promised, but I stayed on vacation longer than I expected. Plus, I didn't realize the difficulty of typing on a laptop keyboard after twenty years of being accustomed to a full sized one. I tell you, those things are a

pain in the ass! So anyway, we got some major action in this chapter, as well as a few heart to heart talks with Harry and his friends. He even told them about the prophecy! Sort of. Bet you didn't think that would happen yet. And yes, I know that you all what to hear about how injured Harry got, and how he was able to make such a speedy recovery. Well, trust me when I say that you'll find out in the next chapter. Also, we'll see the wizarding world's response to Voldy's attacks, and a long overdue letter to Harry. Does anybody know what I'm talking about? I'm hoping to make it a surprise, so we'll see. And oh yeah. It was the same Amber in the attack, and she really is dead. Sorry, no more nookie for Harry there! If I want him to end up with Ginny after all, I can't have anyone else tempting him away, now can I? I guess that means I have to kill Cho next, huh? Ok, time for a rewrite. J/K, although I know many of you would love to see Cho get killed off. Sorry, I've got plans for her. Later all! By the way, I hope my use of two curse words is alright for this rating. It's actually one curse word used twice. I thought it realistic in the circumstance, so tell me if I'm wrong.

Matthew Conolly – You say that I grossly under use the magical lens. Well, you must be a guy then. Yes, I agree with you. However, to avoid a higher rating, and the need to post my work on adult fanfic sites, I do have to reign in Harry's perversity. This isn't a smut story after all. Maybe when I get the chance I'll write an alternate scene and post it in my yahoo group. You never know? However, if that happens, which is a very small chance, you can be sure it will not fit into the rest of the story. This is a PG-13 Harry after all.

Relieved Pitcher – As to your questions about transfiguring objects in dueling, yes, Harry's learning that. I think I even mention it as far back as Chapter 11, where he admits to being able to transfigure small objects one at a time, but not more than that. He also can't launch other spells while controlling a transfigured object, as he needs to focus his concentration. Over the rest of the fic, we'll see progress, but remember. Harry will never reach the level of Voldemort/Dumbledore, at least in fic, as it's just not realistic. Even if he was more magically powerful (which I don't believe), the others have a lifetime of experience, which Harry is only just now touching on. He might be able to defend himself, but don't go expecting him put on a red cape and tights. This is not a SuperPower Harry story!

Rerrer – OK, you got me on the leg locker curse, but I hope I made my point. JKR doesn't mention every incantation in her books, so I don't think I have to do that either. I will mention some (as I already have), but not all

Numba1 – Fine, I put in a little Harry/Ginny moments in the last chapter to get all those shippers of my back, but rest assured that it isn't at the heart of my story. It's just some extra stuff that all teenagers do. And yes, I realize that Ginny didn't need to make Harry suck on her neck for the joke to work. And yes, I realize giving each other massages after each Quid practice is just a thinly veiled excuse to get all touchy feely. But come on, these are the exact type things I did when a teenager. With my hormones raging, I looked for any excuse to spend time with females, whether I was touching them or not. And for your information, the hickie story came directly from my life. I was at summer camp one year, on an overnight trip, when a bunch of us decided to play a joke on our counselors. All the guys marked up the girls' necks, and then we went back to the fire site to shock them all. It really was quite funny, and no one took the pairings we made seriously after that. It was just some harmless fun, and an excuse to suck face.

Darkmoore – Yes, I'm straight. Sorry. And when I think of Natalie Wood, I don't think "West Side Story," I think more "The Searchers." A very manly movie. It's got John Wayne in it for pete's sake! And yes, I'm horny. Aren't we all?

AthenaKitty – I've said this to you before. Harry already knows the counter charm to the handcuff charm! He just said he didn't because he liked to leave Snape in that position. If you go back and read that chapter, Harry mentions that when talking to his double.

Goldilocks31890 – Why don't I like Ron? Well, you claim he's cute, protective, and....more cute. IN my opinion, he's nosy, insensitive, and annoying, not to mention his bad table and study manners. As for being cute, who cares, I'm a guy. Unless Ron's got a great rack, I can very easily dismiss him. And one more thing I hate about most fanfics. Who says that because Ron's so great at chess, he's automatically a brilliant strategist? I'm a chess player, and it's hardly transferable to

war, as so many authors have him doing. It may be a very complex and involved game, but that's all it really is, a game. Now if he played wizarding RISK, I might believe him as a strategist, but come on! And I hardly think that Harry got a lot of practice playing at the Dursleys', so it's no wonder that Ron beats him every time. I wonder why we never see Ron playing anyone else in Gryffindor tower?

Lauren – Glad to see your hurt hands don't interfere with your long reviews! Yes, Harry's not perfect, as I've tried to include some moments showing this in the past. And the future will hold some big mistakes for Harry as well. Yes, Ginny's prank was a little over the top, but not out of character for her I don't think. Think of some of Fred and George's pranks. Now they went over the top. All Ginny had to do was get Harry to kiss her, and then send a letter home to her mum. Most pranks have a lot more planning than that. Ever read Luna the Moonmonster's series of fics. I do enjoy them, but the pranks she has Harry play are way out there! Having all four houses, not to mention the teachers, up on the tables signing show tunes and dancing can cans. Now that's over the top. I'm glad that you like some Hermione moments. I didn't think I had enough of her yet, so I included a fair amount in this past chap. And there will be more Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Neville from now on, as I said in this last chapter. But forget about H/Hr, not going to happen. Harry might notice her "assets," as he's only a guy, but he has no romantic feelings. I have something special in mind for Hermione that should be made apparent around Valentine's Day.

Goddess of the Black Roses – Sorry, no celebration for the Death of Voldemort. One, he's back now, so it's kind of moot. Two, I don't think Harry would appreciate the wizarding world celebrating the death of his parents. And three, we can't overshadow Nearly Headless Nic's Death Day party, now can we?

TuxedoMac – Dude, you sound drunk every time you write. I know English is not your first language, but please read your reviews before hitting the "send" button.

Tombadgerlock – Harry didn't think Ron realized his crush on Herm back in fourth year. He thinks Ron still probably hasn't recognized his feelings for what they are. No, Harry himself noticed Ron's attraction

to Hermione, as evident of his jealousy towards Krum, and his reaction to Herm at the Yule Ball. I think we all realized Ron has strong feelings for Herm back then, if not sooner. I have yet to theorize Herm's feelings towards Ron, except that she might know about his slight crush.

Fanatic25 – Yes, I realized I hadn't integrated that in the story like I hoped. I had too much fun the first chapters, and then it was too late. I will attempt to salvage the rest of the story, and you can be sure the sequels will have a "main plot theme throughout the story." As for a formal, romantic relationship between H/G. Sorry, I think they're too young for that. They'll just be having fun in my fic, and only openly return affection the last few chapters.

PhoenixRising – If contacts me about cutting back or getting rid of my ANs completely, than I will. But until then, I see no need to stop. After all, the only things I've heard are rumors, from other fans. I've yet to see an email or post by that warns against ANs.

Earl – Yes, I'm doing Quid differently. I think that each house should play each other (6 games), and then the top two scoring teams should play for a final. That's the way I'm going to write my fic, although we probably won't see another such in-depth game until the finals. Is it any secret that is will be a Gryff/Slyth rematch?

Wind Whisperer – I think this chapter touched on all the things you mentioned in your review except the duel with Rofordit. Trust me, that's coming, but I'm saving it for a special chapter. I hope you enjoyed everything else, though. Probably not Amber dying, but you've got to take the good with the bad. Sorry about that, but keep reading. I've got plenty more surprises in store for you all.

Gotta B Writin – You were picturing cheesy porno music in your head when you read the last chapter? Funny, I was playing cheesy porno music on my computer when I wrote the last chapter. Go figure, huh? Seriously though, I can understand you not liking the last one as much as others, but I have to add a little of that stuff in my fic. Hopefully you liked this chapter better, so let me know. I think I also answered some of your questions Hermione had about Harry's study habits. See how well I anticipate my readers' needs? I'm a genius!

Dark Immortal – I've addressed this numerous times, but let me do so again. Yes, Harry is aging twice as fast as normal, but no one notices because they think it's just a growth spurt (finally!). And it's been brought up that because wizards live so much longer than muggles, we don't even know if the age at the same rate. A good question, and in my opinion, enough of one to warrant some time tuner usage. After all, no one noticed Hermione when she used one.

Samyjoc- Dude, in my mind, Blaise is a hot chic. Live with it. If the only evidence you can provide that he's a guy is that the name is traditionally male, or that some third world publication of HPSS uses male adjectives to describe the character, I don't think that's enough. Sorry if I broke your heart with that one, but Blaise is just such a cool name. And it screams "hot chic" in my head.

CherryCoke – Ron is such an important character in the books BECAUSE he can be put down. After all, it would do well for JKR to make her title character a prat, now would it? Ron's her punching bag in a way, and I've expanded on that ideal. And if you disagree, look at some of the evidence. In the first story (SS; book or movie), Ron's supposed to be all heroic sacrificing himself for the others. I say, Hogwash! He's a prat, or at best a nancy boy. Just look at this line. "...Harry, you be the bishop.....Hermione the rook. And me (pauses dramatically to place hands on hips), I'll be a knight!" What aponce!

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I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving too many (not really!) reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit. A link to the site is on my bio page.

## Chapter 20 – Aftermath

The early Sunday morning sun dawned bright as it rose over the still-damaged building tops of Diagon Alley. Off in the distance a clock struck the hour, and a tall man in a dark hooded cloak stepped away from the alleyway he'd been hiding in.

Not stopping to greet any other shoppers, nor pausing long enough to give any of the patrolling aurors a problem, the tall man led himself quickly through the double doors of Gringotts. Still open on Sundays, although for not as long, Gringotts was his only destination in mind for the day, and he had a lot of business to discuss.

"Fetch your manager, goblin," he snarled to the nearest employee. Normally, a goblin wouldn't stand for such insolent behavior. But this was a relatively young employee, and the tall wizard was not known to be polite. He came from one of the oldest and purest families to date, and had a reputation for pure evil, though he'd never been caught.

Not a minute later the tall man was seated in a private office, large and plush by goblin tradition, but only barely satisfactory by the man's normal standards. Across from the desk sat an old and reputable goblin; just one of the seven bank managers for the Diagon Alley branch. Or at least, he was as reputable as goblins could get. When it came to money, there weren't many things they weren't willing to do. And since Gringotts didn't operate under wizarding law thanks to the last Goblin Rebellion of 1723, that was truly saying something.

The goblin manager who went by the name of Gliptrot, as it was most closely translated from his native tongue of Gobbledegook, had little to no patience in the mornings for arrogant wizards. However, the most unusual request he'd just received from the man sitting across from him; in fact the very first words out of his mouth; was enough to peak his interest and make him forget about disliking the man.

"Would you repeat that, please?" Gliptrot asked. He wanted to make sure he heard correctly before approving such a large transaction.

"You heard me correctly, goblin. I want to transfer all funds in every one of my accounts, into vault number 833B. That includes all ready currency, all investments, all jewels and magical objects, and anything else you'll find. You may find some items of questionable merit, but I trust that they're no concern of yours. I want the transfer to take place by the end of the day, and if you need to increase the bank's normal fee to do so, you may. As long as the transfer takes place."

Gliptrot sat back in his chair as he considered the request. Never in the history of the bank had one wizard wanted to transfer not only his entire personal wealth, but in fact that of his entire family's, to another. And considering the wizard in question, Gringotts was due to make a small fortune just off the bank fees for such a transfer. There had to be a catch! Yet, as he drew up the appropriate paperwork for the man to sign, he couldn't come up with one feasible drawback. Only when discovering the name of vault number 833B's owner did the goblin again question the wizard.

"Are you sure about this, sir? You do know that vault 833B belongs to...."

"I'm not stupid, halfling! I know perfectly well who the vault belongs too. And why we're talking about your incompetence, you seem to be missing a vault number here. I said all my vaults, and that includes number 14V as well."

At mention of the V line of vaults, the goblin became more interested. Not known to the public, a person could only open a V vault if recommended by another vault holder. That was the way the system had been set up nearly fifty years ago by a very wealthy financial backer, and that was the way it had since remained. In fact, besides the owners of said vaults, only the bank managers themselves, plus a few security goblins, were aware of them. The group of one hundred vaults had been set up by wizard magic, and to this day it was the same magic that maintained security there. Except for routine patrols, no goblins did any kind of upkeep or maintenance on the V vaults. The vaults themselves weren't even connected to the normal Gringott's tunnel system. Specially designed portkeys were the only way to access the area.

"My apologies sir, but as you know, I'm not allowed to discuss even the existence of V vaults unless prompted to by a vault holder. I'll add that to the paperwork immediately."

The tall wizard just sneered and nodded in reply. He had little patience for trivial matters, and still had much to do that day. The goblin returned to drafting more paperwork to be signed, and the man sat perfectly still all the while. Except for the many signatures he had to give, only once did he break free from his statue-like pose. He had to scratch an itch on the inside of his left forearm. For little did the goblin know, although he would be wise to suspect, the tall wizard had the tattoo of a Dark Mark burned into his flesh.

Twenty minutes later all the paperwork had been signed and filed, and both parties left the cramped office satisfied. The tall wizard because he'd done what he'd set out to accomplish with little hassle, and Gliptrot because he'd just approved a transfer of funds that would make a bank profit of thousands of galleons in a single day. And as bank manager of the single largest branch of the exclusive wizarding bank, he himself would be entitled to some of those same profits.

Not watching the goblin he left behind him in his wake, the tall man swept out of the cavernous lobby, back into the sunny streets of Diagon Alley. His hooded cloak and black robes hid him from both the sun and any unwanted attention, and as soon as he appeared, the man was lost in the crowd.

Ten minutes later, another darkly dressed man entered the bank lobby. Not tall like his associate, but instead portly and hunched over, he had to wait in line to ask a teller goblin to see the bank manager as well. Although not as well respected as the first man, this one too was well known and not to be trifled with. So without another moment's delay, he was escorted into the same small office to have a meeting along similar lines.

Gliptrot, who had barely finished filing all the morning's paperwork, you could imagine was surprised when this wizard too asked for all his family's wealth to be transferred to vault 833B. Not the same sized fortune as the first, but still not by any means loose change, the

man further went on to request that his vault number 34V be added to that list as well.

Not knowing what to say, except to ask for a verification of instructions, Gliptrot pulled the same reacquisition forms, and had the stout wizard repeat the process of the tall one just minutes before. There were less total vaults involved this time, and because the course of action was already familiar to him, the task was accomplished much quicker.

Not even a half hour after he first entered the bank, the stout wizard pulled his hood back on and exited the building. Now that it had been opened for over an hour, the bank's lobby was quite busy. So busy in fact, that nobody noticed that this stout wizard too briefly scratched his left forearm as he descended the stairs into the outside world.

When the third darkly dressed man was escorted into Gliptrot's office an hour later, he wasn't surprised at all. This time the wizard was another lumpy man, who looked something like the last one. In fact, they had been best friends all their lives, as were their sons, and mistaking one for the other was a common error made about them often. Not that the goblin knew that information, or even cared. No, he was too busy pulling the same reacquisition forms he already knew he'd be asked for. And sure enough, the same bizarre request to transfer his family's funds to vault 833B came not a moment later, included a transfer from vault 33V.

And so the process repeated itself. In the course of five hours that day, one darkly dressed wizard after another would walk into the bank manager's office, ask for the same transfer of funds into vault 833B, and walk out after signing in duplicate all appropriate paperwork. Only two things were similar in all the men. One, they all had a V vault that they wanted to empty. And two; all men, whether they scratched it or not, had a hideous skull and snake tattoo burnt into their left forearm. Not that Gliptrot would care, even if he had known. No, he was too happy with the bank's profit margin for the day. The slowest business day of the week, and he had set the highest bank profit record since the great sickle scandal of 1261; when half the world's silver sickles had been successfully counterfeited by a rogue group of aurors. A rebellion had broken out of course, and only

after much bloodshed and death had a new agreement been made. All the stolen money was paid back in full to the goblins plus damages (accounting for the profit record), and in exchange for allowing the existing guilty aurors to live, the goblins were granted by the Ministry the right to arm themselves within the confines of the bank, to deter delinquent loans.

The Goblin Rebellion of 1261 though, as interesting as it may be, was not the last thought of the bank manager Gliptrot, as he watched the last darkly dressed man leave that day. No, instead, he thought to the owner of vault 833B, and how he must now be one of the richest men in Europe. Previous to the day the vault had contained hardly anything worth mentioning, but now, the owner had a commanding amount of money at his disposal. One almost wondered; what could so much money provided by such darkly dressed wizards be used for?

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## ONE WEEK BEFORE

When the enormity of Amber's death finally hit him, Harry left the Great Hall in a storm of emotions. Behind him he could vaguely sense that Hermione and/or Ginny stood up to follow him, but were held back by Ron. Someone must of told him about Harry's relationship with Amber, and although it bothered him that one more person was let in on the secret, Harry later was at least grateful to his friend for giving him some alone time. Too many emotions were raging inside him; those of guilt, fear, shame, and most of all anger. It was a good thing Harry was so out of it that he didn't hear the snickers from Slytherin's table as he left breakfast. If Harry had heard, there would be no doubt that a certain blonde haired prefect would get a first hand taste of some of that anger. And it would have been a lot more painful than bouncing off the walls in a harmless prank.

Not knowing where to go, but wanting to be alone, Harry's feet directed him to the Room of Requirement, and Harry stormed inside without a thought why. He mind was too busy wondering why his double hadn't warned him of Amber's death. If Harry had known, he might have been able to prevent it. Of course, it didn't occur to him

until later that that was impossible. The event had already happened, and therefore could not be changed. It was probably why he wasn't informed beforehand. If Harry had known about Amber's upcoming death, surely he wouldn't have been able to focus on the Death Eaters. It also made sense now that his future self wasn't the one to travel to Diagon Alley that night, and instead had taken his place at the feast. Being so close to the action, and yet knowing that he couldn't do anything to prevent future events, would have been too troubling for his future self. All these thoughts zipped through Harry's mind like a flock of rouge bludgers. Once inside though the room though, he was glad he picked the right destination. Harry had a lot of steam to blow off before he'd be safe around others, and the room knew that. For inside, there were only two items provided, both of which brought a grim smile to Harry's face; a cricket bat and a roomful of glass figurines.

Not having played since primary school recess, and not that often as Dudley had prevented it as much as possible, Harry wasn't all that familiar with the bat like other boys might be. It certainly wasn't his game of choice, but still the bat felt right at home in his hands. The leather grip was comforting as Harry lined up his first shot. Not even taking a practice swing, Harry heaved the heavy wood behind him in a graceful arc, and swung downward and then upward in a wide arc with all the power he could muster. The first target was a huge glass-blown vase, and with that first swing, the first huge explosion of shattering glass rang across the room.

Within minutes, Harry had broken every glass object in sight, and the room was already working on providing more behind his back. It worked that way for another ten minutes at least. Harry just stood in the middle of the room, turning in a slow circle, lashing out at the world; destroying all he saw. He wasn't even using a proper cricket swing anymore; instead just using the heavy instrument like a beater bat, swinging it any which way. Once he completed his circle, the room would provide new challenges, and the cycle would start again.

His mind drifted while he destroyed as much as he could get his hands on. Drifted to the night before, when he had portkeyed to his dorm room looking like much of the broken glass that now littered the floor. Not that he remembered it, of course. He had passed out even

before he had arrived at Hogwarts. No, his double had told him later how he had looked, after most of the damage was repaired.

Knowing precisely what would happen, Harry's future self was ready with Hedwig and both house-elves when Harry portkeyed into the dorm room. He looked a boldly mess, with cuts all over his face, neck, and arms, a dislocated shoulder, and at least one cracked rib (his vest only protected from spell damage and sharp objects, not blunt force).

Healing the superficial cuts that Avery had caused was the first thing that got fixed, to stop the loss of blood. Already Harry had lost too much, and whatever means Madame Pomfrey might use to cure such a problem Harry had never found out in his limited reading material about healing. Hedwig's tears were no good to replace lost blood, and Harry couldn't be brought to the hospital wing, because it would prompt too many questions.

In the end, the future Harry had used a primitive blood transfusion spell he looked up real quick. It wasn't as effective as blood replenishing potions normally, but because it was his own blood being used, it worked better than expected. Harry's body didn't have to fight off rejection or try to assimilate the new blood like it normally would.

After that, Harry regained consciousness, and things went more smoothly. Having his arm reset into his shoulder joint was momentarily excruciating, but compared to the Cruciatus practice he was used to, it was bearable. His cracked rib or ribs were healed with some simple spells, and the only type of potion Harry actually took was a general purpose pain reliever. Unfortunately it acted as a stimulant, so Harry couldn't sleep, but that didn't matter. Hedwig used the time to bathe Harry in her tears, to relieve all his aches and pains, and his future self caught him up with the night's activities at Hogwarts, so he wouldn't be caught off guard with something one of his friends might ask him. Hearing about Draco's little flight through the Entrance Hall even made Harry laugh, which wasn't too smart considering his broken ribs. He couldn't wait to see Draco's face next week when he himself was the one to curse the Slytherin.

Harry's double also made sure to secure the five Death Eaters each in their own cell. He wasn't worried that one of them might have been revived or caused trouble, because he knew from his own experience that that wouldn't happen. They'd be interrogated later once Harry was up to it, but for now they were searched for magical objects, stripped of their wands and unnecessary belongings, and only revived once they were in the confines of their stone cells.

The next morning when Harry woke up alone, he was still sore and spent, but he was once again functional. It actually surprised him that Dumbledore was able to pick up so quickly on his discomfort, but at least he was able to think of a believable excuse. Now hours later, still swinging the cricket bat, those slight aches and pains were a thing of memory.

Harry didn't know how long he stayed in there, but it was long enough to make his arms tired. In fact, the only thing he was certain of was that some of the later figurines of glass that he destroyed were of people he knew. Those last objects were solid glass, not hollow or frail like the others, and Harry really had to lean into them with the bat before they were destroyed. One was a bust of Snape, Harry knew. There was also an image of Voldemort, of both Malfoys, of Bellatrix Lestrange, and to Harry's lesser pleasure, one of the Professor Dumbledore as well.

Although Dumbledore hardly belonged grouped with that motley crew, at the time Harry didn't care. He just wanted to lash out at those who had hurt him, and those that he held responsible for all his pain and suffering. It was that last round of images that Harry smashed, that finally appeased him, and calmed him down enough to think logically about what had happened. It was a good thing that Harry didn't recognize all of that last group, otherwise he might never had calmed down at all. For the Room of Requirement had read Harry's subconscious mind, and had provided a bust of himself with that last group as well. It was a good thing that Harry didn't see he blamed himself just as much as the others. He'd been down that road before, and it led nowhere good.

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Remus Lupin wasn't surprised that Harry missed the early morning meeting he'd been promised. For he had read the latest paper too, and although he didn't know about Harry's personal relationship with one Amber Starr, he did know that Harry would feel some guilt and anger anyways, no matter who the victims were.

In fact, with a loud confident knock that sounded just before lunch, Harry presented himself much sooner than Remus would have thought.

"Come in, Harry." He knew it was Harry because of his smell. One of the small perks of being a werewolf. There was something off about the smell though, and Remus figured it out the second he saw his late friend's only son walk into his office.

"My god, Harry! What happened to you. You look nearly worse than I do!" The last full moon was only five days gone by, and Remus was still recovering.

Harry didn't know what Remus was talking about, but by looking at the wall mirror at Remus's suggestion, he saw that his face and neck was littered with small nicks and cuts obviously caused by the flying glass. It was the blood that Remus had smelt. Funny, Harry didn't notice them being caused. He was mind was obviously elsewhere. At least any bits of glass that might have been imbedded in his skin disappeared when he exited the room.

Harry just sighed as he plopped down in an armchair, and took out his wand to cast some healing charms. They easily took care of the small abrasions, and after convincing Remus that no, he didn't need to see Madame Pomfrey, they finally got around to having a long overdue discussion.

"Well, you promised an explanation for last night," Remus demanded. "I still don't see how it was possible for you to be in Diagon Alley. According to the staff you were accounted for all of last night, and never left the castle. But I'd recognize that patronus anywhere, and even if you didn't whisper to me to keep quiet, I would have known you were there. Besides being the only golden patronus I've ever seen or even heard of, the shape of a stag is also very recognizable."

You're lucky Dumbledore was busy trying to break the Death Eaters' shields at the time, otherwise things could have gone much less smoother last night."

"What did you end up telling everyone, anyway? I'm sure they all noticed the gold patronus. Not to mention, the destroyed Dementors." Harry was actually interested in the cover story Remus came up with. It had obviously worked somewhat, although Dumbledore still made that crack earlier about things not being fully explained.

"I told everyone that the patronus was mine," Remus admitted. "Nobody noticed my wolf because everyone was admiring your beautiful stag. It made sense that it would be a stag for me as well, because James was a good friend. Plus, I helped you learn your patronus back in third year, and I claimed that it was one of the happiest memories of my life to help out a friend's son. Basically I admitted that my patronus changed form, and since no one's seen my patronus since before I taught you yours, no one knows that I'm lying."

Harry wrinkled his brow in objectivity. It was believable enough to think that Remus's patronus had changed form to his friend's animagus form. After all, James spent three years learning the skill especially for him. The only thing that would be suspicious was that Harry also had the same form, and Harry wasn't even sure if that was possible. Could two different wizards have the same animal totem as a patronus? Luckily, it didn't matter. Remus explained that because the spell was gold instead of silver, nobody made the connection to Harry. Why would they? Who would have thought that a sixth year student was at the scene of the crime, fighting off evil wizards?

"But how did you explain the gold color, then?" Harry asked.

"Well," Remus admitted, "that was the hard part. I couldn't think of a possible explanation, so I just pleaded ignorance. After all, that's what really happened to you. When you do figure it out, let me know, as I've got Dumbledore and Flitwick breathing fire down my throat, wanting to know the answer to that question. Dumbledore's suspicious I think, but he really can't argue with what everyone saw. How else can you explain the dead bodies of so many Dementors?"

Filius almost made me try to produce the charm, to see if I could repeat the same results. Even without the gold color, like you can't reproduce, it would have been hard to explain another shift in my patronus's form. Luckily though we had more pressing matters to worry about at the time, and I promised to research the occurrence and get back to them.

"Oh, good thinking," Harry said. The most believable lies were the simplest, and by having Remus just tell the truth, it left everyone confused about the ability. Well, not everyone, now that Harry knew how the gold patronus was caused. Quickly, Harry filled Remus in about Prong's tattoo on his forearm, and how he now knew that was the reason.

"So your tattoos finally showed their power, huh? It's about time. I was starting to think that they weren't going to pay off." Remus was speaking to himself more than anything else at this point. It was the type of verbal brainstorming Harry had come to expect from his friend. "I guess then that means that other wizards can't produce a golden patronus, unless they too have a magical tattoo. But what are the chances that their tattoos would have the same power? Almost nil, really. I guess this is just one more special talent you'll have to deal with Harry. Maybe we could somehow round up rogue Dementors, and then bring you in to exterminate them? No, the Ministry wouldn't go for that. The Order might, but then we'd have to let them in on our little secret." Remus continued mumbling to himself until Harry brought him back to reality.

"Ah, Remus? You still there?"

"What? Oh, sorry Harry. Just lost in thought for a moment. Anyway, you never explained what you were even doing in Diagon Alley last night, and how you managed to even get there." The look of intellectual wonder was gone from his eyes now, and Remus's tone also became harsher. He was questioning Harry now as an authority figure, not as a friend.

Not wanting to give away his secret of using the time tuner yet, Harry just admitted that he'd portkeyed out of the castle right after the feast had ended. And since Remus was only aware of Harry being in

Diagon Alley towards the end of the battle, that made perfect sense. Harry claimed that he had a vision of the Dementors, and entered the battle because he knew he could help. There was no need to worry the werewolf about his injuries, or his other battles. Remus had enough on his mind already, and the only reason Harry got off so easily was one, because Remus had a busy schedule, and two, Harry had proved beneficial to the fight by showing up when he did and destroying the Dementors.

Remus did his part by giving Harry a detailed description of the battle from his perspective, as well as the clean up afterwards. It was only then, after the Order had returned from Azkaban (being too late and leaving the investigation for the aurors to handle), that Remus and the others had started to clean up the damage, and had noticed the two casualties. Peter Growkins, the man kissed by the Dementor, hadn't his soul restored to him because obviously the Dementor who had kissed him had fled the scene before Harry's patronus could attack. And then the other one; Amber. Remus didn't know about her and Harry, so he described her death with just as much indifference. Just another casualty of war; no special than any other.

"The girl we found crushed under falling debris. A young boy claimed she had pushed him out of the way of a falling boulder, so she died a hero. There's talk from the Ministry to award her a special accommodation for her actions."

Harry just nodded as tears welled up in his eyes. Softly he whispered, "Yes, Amber would have liked that."

At Harry's strange remark, Remus took a closer look at his pseudo-nephew. Something was wrong. "Yes, her name was Amber. Amber Starr I believe. How'd you know that, Harry?"

Harry didn't even consider not answering the question. Normally he would have, but the morning spent smashing objects to smithereens over and over again had helped him blow off some steam. Now he was just left hurting, and sad. Harry guessed he could open up to Hermione or Ginny about this since they knew about Amber already, but Harry didn't want pity from his friends. Remus wouldn't pity him. He'd lost people too, more so than even Harry had. He'd understand.

"Besides being in the paper, I knew her." Harry explained, with almost an emotionless expression on his face. "She attended to me this summer when I got fitted for robes. Actually, she more or less picked out my whole wizard wardrobe. We spent the better part of two hours together that day, and she asked me out on a date when I left. I wasn't sure about that, being a target for Death Eaters and all, but I promised to meet her if I ever returned to Diagon Alley. I did once, and we snuck into muggle London to have lunch. It was actually very nice; the best date I've ever been on. Not that that's saying much, as I've only had two. Still, Amber was very easy to get along with, and she even kissed me when the day ended. I haven't seen her since, but we've been writing to each other once a week since school's started. She was even going to meet me in Hogsmeade this past weekend, but had to work at the last moment. She promised to come next time though. I guess now that will never happen. Trust me to know the one person who died in that whole attack. It's always the people I'm close to that suffer."

Tears streamed silently down Harry's check as he finished, not that his steadfast voice gave way the fact that he'd been crying. He wiped at the wetness with the back of his sleeve, and didn't say anything more. Neither did Remus.

Remus didn't know what to say, actually. It was something of a bombshell that Harry admitted to not only knowing the victim he'd not previously put a name to, but knew her well. He'd never had any kids for himself, and Remus didn't know how to give the proper comfort. So instead, he said nothing. At least nothing was better than saying the wrong thing, and Remus knew Harry hated pity and unfelt-sympathy. Anymore reprimanding he had planned to give Harry about being at the sight of the battle was completely forgotten. After a few minutes of awkward silence, where Harry composed himself and Remus looked over some paperwork, Harry broke the silence with a new topic, much to Remus's pleasure.

"So," Harry asked, "what's the Order been up to lately. I've not asked in awhile, but I wonder what they're going to do now after the latest attack."

Glad to have something more comfortable to talk about, Remus filled Harry on most of what the Order of the Phoenix was up to. He couldn't be specific, as Dumbledore had withheld most details from him as per their agreement, but he still knew a lot about their plans.

Since Harry's press conference, Kingsley and the other aurors had been called off the hunt for Sirius, and were now assigned to guard the school, as part of the rotating shifts. In their down time they kept close watch in the Ministry, to see which personnel might be trusted, and which might be not. Most of that time was spent making sure that Fudge wasn't causing any trouble. Since his humiliation by Harry, he'd managed to stay in office, but just barely. He blamed his whole staff for the mistakes, and had them all reassigned to low level positions, like had happened to Percy. Umbridge had gone missing after the Quibbler and Daily Prophet articles, and Fudge used that to his advantage saying she had been passing Ministry laws in his name, without his knowledge or consent. It was all lies, Harry and the others knew, but none of the Order could prove it.

Bill and Charlie Weasley had returned to their normal jobs after the summer ended. They stayed home just long enough to attend the press conference with Harry, and then left for Egypt and Romania respectfully. Bill still commuted home on the weekends, but Charlie only attended Order meetings when he could. Otherwise, he was given the task about training small breeds of dragons for possible defense purposes. It had never been done before by wizards, but after remembering the dragons the goblins used in the low level vaults, Harry thought that if anyone could get the job done, it would be Charlie.

Remus, since he was stationed at Hogwarts anyways, was given the job of keeping an eye out for students that might have Death Eater ties. Mostly the upper level Slytherins, but Harry wasn't surprised to find that some Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were on his watch list as well. Remus refused to give Harry the names, as he said it would hurt his case if Harry acted any different towards them, and Harry eventually gave in. At least there were no Gryffindor names on the list. That Remus told him, anyway.

Kingsley, Tonks, and some of the other aurors stationed at the castle, who were part of the Order, spent parts of their nights sneaking around, secretly spying on the students. Dumbledore had provided them with the common rooms' passwords and locations of secret passages, so it made the job much easier. And since Harry knew that Tonks and the others had access to invisibility cloaks, he could guess how they went about spying. Harry thought he'd have to take a closer look at the Marauder's Map at night, and not just when he was patrolling.

Apparently Snape had had a close call earlier that fall while talking to some former friends in Knockturn Alley, and had barely escaped capture. He'd been forced to fight off two Death Eaters before he was able to apparate away, and then quickly return to Hogwarts. Since then, Dumbledore had not allowed the man to leave the castle alone, and only Mundungus Fletcher kept up with spying on the seedy underworld on Diagon Alley. It was just too much of a risk for Snape anymore, now that Voldemort was made public, because he had too high a price on his head. It was not forgotten that Snape had jumped sides to spy against Voldemort.

"Besides," Remus joked, "if Severus gets caught, then who'd make my Wolfsbane Potion? We can't have that, now can we?"

Other than all that, the Order wasn't doing much else. They just listened for possible gossip about Voldemort's plans, continued to make sure Fudge wasn't further corrupting the Ministry, and made sure that there was always a safe number of trained wizards guarding the area around Hogwarts' grounds, whether they were Order members or Ministry aurors.

"Now though, I'm told we'll also be helping the Ministry arrange similar auror patrols in Diagon Alley. The damage has already been mostly cleared away, but Dumbledore feels that restoring the public's feeling of safety when in Diagon Alley is the largest concern for now. He claims we can't show that we're afraid, and must stick to the way that things have always been. So from now on, there will always be at least ten aurors present in Diagon Alley during peak hours, and less for round the clock surveillance. That probably started earlier today."

"So Dumbledore's not doing anything about tracking down the escaped Death Eaters from Azkaban, to try and recapture them? What about the Ministry? They can't just sit idly by, can they?" Harry couldn't understand how Dumbledore and the others could just sit back and be content to play defense. If they never actively sought out to find the criminals, then how did they figure they'd be caught?

Remus just sighed. "No, not for now, anyway. The Order doesn't have the time or resources right now to take on that type of responsibility. Hopefully news of Azkaban's liberation will push Fudge out of office once and for all, and we can only hope someone worthy gets placed in office in his stead. We've had Order members working politics in the Ministry, just for that occasion. I only hope we can garner enough support when that happens. If not, we could be in bigger trouble then with Fudge in office. Imagine if Lucius Malfoy becomes the new Minister? Already news of his involvement in the Ministry attack last summer has quieted down, and he still has a lot of connections to powerful friends in office. Or just as bad, he could place his financial backing behind a seemingly good candidate for the office, just to turn him into a political puppet. It's all more complicated than it looks Harry, and Dumbledore's doing the best that he can."

The two talked of more pleasant things while they had a private lunch together, but Harry's couldn't keep his mind totally off what Remus had told him. Somehow, Harry just didn't think Dumbledore and the Order was doing enough. With all their members and resources, they still were only waiting and watching, never acting for themselves. Harry alone, with no one's help but his own, had single handedly managed to capture Peter Pettigrew, Avery, Sean Hazelton, plus four other Death Eaters. Yes, he'd been extremely lucky, and had gotten injured. Yes, he was working outside the law, and taking dangerous risks. Yes, he knew that Dumbledore would never take the same type of actions that he had, to neutralize some of Voldemort's Death Eaters. 'Still,' Harry thought, 'it's at least tangible progress, which is more than I can say for the Order's results. I don't care if I break a hundred Ministry laws and decrees, as long as I continue to show progress.' And progress was just what Harry was accomplishing.

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As it turned out, Remus wasn't far off with one of his predictions that day. Later in the week, the Daily Prophet announced that the public outcry from the two Death Eater attacks caused a special meeting of Ministry of Magic heads and the Wizengamot, to discuss Minister Fudge's impeachment.

By law, it took a majority vote of the Wizengamot to impeach a Minister, and Fudge thought he was safe as he owned more than half of the corrupt assembly. Amelia Bones and Dumbledore were some of the more outspoken of those that had voted in favor of removing Minister Fudge from office, but still it wasn't enough. With a vote of seven against impeachment, and four in favor, Fudge remained Minister of Magic.

However, it was department head Arthur Weasley who pointed out that the Wizengamot's vote could be overruled by a two thirds vote of all department heads. Such a vote hadn't been taken in over a hundred years, but fortunately the law wasn't one of the ones Fudge had had time to change during his time in office. A mistake he'd sorely regret.

There are seven main branches in the Ministry of Magic, and a multiple number of individual departments in each. Thirty three of the Fifty one Ministry office heads were required to be present to take a vote of no confidence, and luckily that day here were forty seven department heads present. Only thirty one needed to vote in favor to overthrow the Wizengamot's decision, and they had that in spades. Apparently Fudge hadn't spent enough time or gold spreading his influence around the Ministry heads, and thirty nine of the forty seven present chose to elect a new Minister; one who might possibly do a decent job for a change.

The paper didn't report on Fudge's reaction to the news, but Harry's could only imagine the spluttering and yelling that had gone on. One day, Harry would have to ask Dumbledore to see the memories of that scene.

It had taken another six hour meeting to decide on a temporary solution, as a vote such as that hadn't happened in over a hundred years, and hadn't been successful in three hundred. But as the long

day came to an end, it had been decided. A proper public vote open to any political candidates would take place as normally scheduled come next September, and until then Madam Amelia Bones was promoted by her peers as acting Minister of Magic. Having an Order member in such a high position certainly made Harry very happy, and when he read in the paper her first decrees as Minister, he was even more thrilled.

As her first act as Minister of Magic, she named Arthur Weasley (former Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office), Amos Diggory (formerly of the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures), and Arnold Peacegood (former Head Obliviator) as her three Under-Ministers. Kingsley Shacklebolt was named in her place as Head of the Magical law Enforcement Division, and Albus Dumbledore was approved as Chief Warlock to investigate and question all members of the Wizengamot for possible evidence of corruption. All in all, it was a very good day for the Order of the Phoenix.

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Thursday was always a long day for Harry. First he had Defense Against the Dart Arts where Rofordit had run out of volunteers to try and best her. Harry, Hermione, and a few others had yet to throw their name in the hat, but more than one person had tried multiple times to win a duel against the elderly witch. Ron couldn't understand why Harry didn't try himself, but Harry only smiled and politely refused. He was too busy learning at his own pace, and didn't want to have to explain his advanced level of spells to his professor or the Headmaster should they ask. And Harry knew it would be next to impossible to beat her just using sixth year spells or less. So he didn't even try.

When not dueling her students, Rofordit had proved to be a very capable educator. Her theory lessons were short and to the point, and her choice of material wasn't useless or impractical like that of so many other DADA professors Harry had had. Just two and a half months into term, already Harry and his classmates had learned another shield spell besides Protego (to be used for physical objects; not magical), sense deprivation spells, that temporarily deprived the

target of hearing, sight, or sense of touch, and they had learned about some more dark creatures. This time though, they were more advanced than Hinkypunks and Red Caps. Already, Harry had been fascinated by tales of Nundus, Chimaeras, and Banshees, and how to defend against them. She didn't touch too much on less harmful creatures, as she didn't want to overlap with Hagrid's curriculum, but she also talked briefly about some others known to be menaces.

Acromantulas were actually on that short list, and Ron and Harry shared a small smile between them. Professor Rofordit had caught the smile too, but she didn't mind. In fact, she was fascinated with their tale of Aragog and his family, and made them tell the class about their experience second year. Since Ron had made an art of telling the story over the years, and his version was often more entertaining and over-embellished than Harry's, Harry let him have the center stage. Ron liked the attention, and Harry preferred to be left out of the lime-light, so both were happy. According to Ron's story Harry was nearly eaten until Ron ran over one particularly nasty spider with his family car, and cast the charm to repel the "eight legged freak." Clearly Rofordit at this point had doubted his story, and kindly asked Ron to the front of the class to demonstrate the spell to defend against an acromantula. Needless to say that she was surprised to find he was quite capable, and went on to show the class the incantation. Ron earned ten pointed for Gryffindor that morning, more than Hermione even. A very good class, only made better by all the congratulations he was getting from different students about his dad's recent promotion.

After DADA, and a training session with his double in his trunk, was Transfiguration. The students were still working on cross-species work, because it was very difficult. Often, a transfigured animal would attack itself, if the change wasn't complete or made correctly. That happened to Neville, when his mouse was transfigured into a canary. He choose a canary because of his fondness for the twins' sweet which he had helped test (although unknowingly), but didn't think of the possible repercussions. Now that he didn't take Potions anymore, Transfiguration was Neville's worse subject, and although he completed the physical change, he must not have had as much success on the animal's mind. Once the canary was completed, it took one look at itself and went into convulsions. Apparently, it was

explained by McGonagall after it pecked itself to death, the mind was still that of a mouse, and therefore went into shock. It didn't have the higher intelligence to accept the transfiguration, so therefore harmed itself in fright because birds were natural predators of mice. Neville felt bad that the creature had died, but since Professor McGonagall reprimanded him much more fairly than Snape ever did, he didn't let the failure bother him. Evidently, he wasn't the first student to fail in such a matter, nor would he be the last.

Harry and Hermione were more successful than Neville. The first two to finish the exercise, Harry turned his mouse successfully into a pig, and Hermione transfigured hers into a mallard. Others in the class made the change too, but not as perfectly. Terry Boot from Ravenclaw had an armadillo on his desk, but one that still had a mouse's tail. Draco Malfoy of course turned his mouse into a snake. He'd gotten the mind transfigured correctly as the snake wasn't scared of itself, but its scales weren't as sleek as they ought to be. They had bits of fur on them; clear remnants of a mouse.

After the winter holidays, McGonagall explained that the class would be moving on to other challenging work. Human transfiguration would be explained in theory (to prepare the students for practical work in seventh year), and large object transfiguration and conjuration would be taught as well. Those skills Harry had already learned, as he'd been forced to learn how to conjure and transfigure most of his Hideaway's furniture. Still, the human transfiguration stuff sounded interesting. Harry was still having trouble with any progress in the Animagus department, and the extra theory study might help.

The D.A. that night was successful as always. The beginning students who had met the night before had learned half the material the D.A. had learned the year before already. Meeting weekly, plus having Remus and Cho's assistance in class, helped tremendously. The advanced group was still working on their patroni, as Harry thought it was a worthy spell to learn. Now that the Dementors were free from Azkaban and attacking the public, it made more sense than ever, and none of the students were complaining; not even Zacharias Smith. Harry also showed the group some binding spells to conjure ropes and ties, some small illusions to use while hiding either yourself or a location, and some offensive stuff as well. The offensive spells

he taught were nothing like the advanced magic he was practicing himself, but it was still useful.

Hermione right away favored the “Contendo Fabopera” spell, which shoots out conjured bean-bags from the end of a wand. It isn’t as effective as muggle bean-bag devices (like those found in shotgun shells), but the spell’s still fired fast enough to cause some damage, or at least confuse an opponent. And because the bags are physical objects, not magical energy, normal shield spells like Protego won’t block against it. Instead, physical barrier shield spells, like the one Voldemort used in the DoM, or what Snape tried to use in Dumbledore’s office, were needed. Eventually, Harry would teach the group those as well.

Ron preferred some of the physical training Harry began to show the group. Because he was joining in on the gym equipment work-outs with Neville occasionally, Ron really liked the chance to grapple with some of the other guys in the group. Harry showed them the basics of wrestling, and explained how they weren’t allowed to hit or kick anyone, but were only allowed to use grips and holds to throw an opponent to the ground. Remus at first wasn’t comfortable with allowing the D.A. to fight in such a manner, but after a demonstration by Harry where he disabled both Ernie and Justin without the use of a wand, Remus allowed it. Harry promised he knew enough of what he was doing, and in the case of an emergency, the hospital wing was never too far away. Plus, lately Hedwig had taken to joining the group when they met, and her tears were better than almost anything that Madam Pomfrey could offer up.

Ginny and Neville had been more impressed with some of the illusion and confusion spells that Harry had showed them. They didn’t take nearly as much power or concentration to cast; so it was possible to use more than one spell at a time. Instead of power of concentration, they were most successful when used creatively, and Ginny and Neville had no problems doing that. Neville became quick at thinking on his feet, as it closely related to his position as beater. He constantly had to be ready for anything, and he said that waiting for an unknown spell to show itself was much like noticing a bludger bearing down on you without much warning. Ginny was used to creative thinking thanks to her brothers Fred and George, and often

times her series of light curses and hexes were more debilitating than any one single curse or spell could be, no matter how powerful it was. She'd also taken to showing the group her famous Bat Bogey Hex. Not even Harry had read about that one in all his many books, and after he'd heard about its effects on Draco Malfoy the year before, he made sure it became part of his arsenal.

Quidditch practice was held that night after dinner, and the team was gearing up for its next match against Hufflepuff. They didn't have to worry about rough and illegal play like they did against Slytherin, but Harry still wanted the team to work on their weaknesses. Both Neville and Frank were spending quality time in the weight room Harry had set up, and already were lasting twice as long on the pitch without having to take a break. The three chasers were working better too, although they still had to use their hand signals. But their unique practice drills and the spending of more time together was helping out more than they expected, and Harry thought that while during the Hufflepuff match they might still be a little loose, by the time Gryffindor played against Ravenclaw, they'd be a well oiled machine.

And as if the day wasn't long enough already, Harry had his last detention with Hagrid that night. The first one Wednesday night was easy. Hagrid had mentioned the possibility of borrowing Hedwig to give his classes a lesson about Phoenixes, and when Harry agreed (with Hedwig's permission of course), the two had spent the night in Hagrid's comfortable hut drawing up lesson plans for the following week. Thursday night however, Hagrid had different plans. It was time to venture into the Forbidden Forest, he said, to try and mend the rift with the centaur herd. Harry thought it might not be such a good idea for him to accompany Hagrid because of his and Hermione's venture into the forest at the end of last year, but Hagrid said that's specifically why he had waited for Harry. Hagrid wanted Harry to explain his actions, so the heard would know he wasn't intentional or arrogant. He had simply been trying to escape from a professor that had abused her position, and not known the centaurs would be angry.

Whatever he had to do, Harry figured, would be better then what Snape had had in mind for his punishment of treating Draco like a human balloon. When Snape had heard from Draco about what Harry

had done the night of the attack (he just heard about the levitation spell, the colorful tights were not surprisingly left out of the story), he had marched up to Harry at the next day's breakfast and demanded to know what Harry was thinking. Harry hadn't had any words with Snape in over a month, and had no problem therefore keeping his calm and explaining that he retaliated to one of Malfoy's normal insults. Harry admitted he was wrong, notified Professor Snape he had already been punished, and then went back to eating his meal.

Snape however wasn't so successful in keeping his calm, and demanded that Harry turn his attention away from his food and back to him. He then proceeded to give a two minute lecture about how spoiled and pompous Harry was to think that he could get away with treating one of his students like that, and not think he'd be further punished. Snape had then gone on to demote fifty points more from Harry, as well as another twenty points from his friends, who he knew had witnessed the crime, but had done nothing to prevent it. Snape also assigned a week's detention to Harry to be served with him, and thinking he had won, turned to leave.

"Sorry Professor, but that won't be happening." They were the first words Harry had said since Snape had started his tirade, and they were just the words to send Snape off over the edge.

"Why you little brat! Twenty points from Gryffindor, for your insubordination. Who are you, to tell me what will be and won't be happening?"

Setting his spoon down in his cereal bowl, Harry turned his head up to face his ex-professor for the first time in over a month. Calmly, because he knew he would get in more trouble if he lost his temper or insulted the man, Harry replied, "You ask me who I am? Well, I'll tell you. I'm the student who's already been reprimanded by the Headmaster, and had previously told you that I won't be serving any detentions with you ever again, not wanting to put up with your blatant favoritism. I'm the student who thinks it's unfair you demote points from my friends when in fact they did try to get me to stop cursing Malfoy, but yet don't take points off your own house for them instigating the fight in the first place. And most importantly, I'm the student who's being interrupted during my personal time; interrupting

my meal in fact, by the petty and unjust accusations I've come to expect from you; the very professor who I made sure I'd never have to associate with again. I suggest, Professor Snape, that if you have a problem with my involvement in levitating Draco, or my punishment for doing so, you take it up with the Headmaster. Seeing as I explained the situation to him fully, and he was the one to administer my detentions in the first place, it's really him you should be complaining to. And as I don't have anything more to you to say, I'll ask you now to please leave so I can continue with my breakfast. That's who I am, sir."

All around Harry, students were holding their laughter in for they knew it wasn't a good idea to get on Snape's bad side. The whole dining room had quieted down to listen to Snape's tirade, and so had heard Harry's response as well. But suddenly, a laugh escaped someone's mouth from the Ravenclaw table, and that broke the dam. Laughs rang out from all directions, and even Harry began to laugh at the look of pure horror on Snape's face. It seemed that he wasn't aware that the entire school population had been listening in on his conversation. What's more, he couldn't subtract points from anyone, as most of the whole school was involved with the laughter, including the staff and most of his own house. Only Draco and his goons shared the scowl Snape shot towards Harry before he stormed out of the room.

Needless to say, no additional points were deducted from Gryffindor that morning, nor was Harry required to attend additional detentions. Harry had walked a fine line in dealing with Snape, but since he remained calm, polite, and impartial, there was no real ground for any additional punishment. Professor Dumbledore had a hell of a time convincing Snape of that in his office later that day in a private meeting, but being the Headmaster, he did.

Shaking the memories of that morning out of his head, Harry couldn't help but fiddle with his dagger as he noticed Hagrid not only took his crossbow but a long spear into the woods with him. Harry's fears were alleviated though when they met the herd. Bane spoke with both of them grudgingly, and accepted that the trouble last year was an accident. Having Grawp move out of the Forbidden Forest didn't hurt the situation either. Hagrid almost blew the conversation when he

started to talk about having his brother back to visit for the holidays, but wisely Harry turned the conversation's direction to other pleasant matters.

In the end the centaurs said they'd return to their peaceful ways when dealing with Hogwart's staff, as long as any trips into the forest were limited, and they were left alone in peace. If they wanted any contact, they'd make themselves known, and only then. Firenze was also still forbidden to return to the tribe, or even the forest, as his position hadn't changed any. Harry tried to convince Bane that he wasn't working in servitude of wizards, but instead worked besides them as an equal, but his pleas remained unnoticed. And every time Harry thought he might be getting through to one of the centaurs (more than Bane had joined in by now), he'd be interrupted by a centaur commenting on how bright Mars was, or how the alignment of the seventh house of Jupiter was strong tonight. Then, when the conversation would return away from the stars, Harry had lost any gain he though he'd made.

Truly exhausted, Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower late that night, well after the second group of prefects had already finished their patrol. Hagrid had wanted to stop by and see Aragog also, but Harry had pleaded against it, describing his day's schedule. Thankfully Hagrid agreed, and Harry didn't have to use the argument that he wasn't particularly fond of Aragog. Harry wasn't to sure if Hagrid had ever heard of his and Ron's run in with the giant spider years earlier, and he didn't want to be the one to tell Hagrid that his "friend" had tried to eat them.

Friday morning dawned early, and Harry decided to skip his morning work- out, he was so tired. He'd only gotten five hours sleep since coming back in from Hagrid's detention, and that wasn't nearly enough. Thank Merlin he only had one class that day. Maybe he could even take a nap that afternoon, after his practice session.

A letter that came to him at breakfast however changed all his day's plans. A large strange owl delivered a thick parchment envelope to Harry, which had a bulky item in it as well. Harry was just studying the strange seal on the envelope, when Hermione interrupted his thoughts.

"Harry! Have you seen the paper today yet? Isn't it great news?" Harry had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, so he asked her.

"It's Sirius," she explained. "There's a story on page three that says Minister Bones finally pardoned him, and explained in detail how he was never guilty. Now that Fudge is out of office, she made it one of her first tasks. And although Wormtail escaped from Azkaban with the rest of the Death Eaters last weekend, he was already interrogated by aurors under Veritaserum. Isn't that great?"

Harry couldn't help but smile and agree. Although it was much too late to make any kind of difference to anything other than Sirius's memory, it still felt good that now Harry could talk about his godfather without whispering in hushed tones. The world now knew Sirius had never betrayed his friends, and that did mean something.

"And guess what?" She continued. "The Ministry normally gives out a healthy compensation for wrongful imprisonment cases. But since Sirius isn't alive anymore, they've donated his reward to charity. Ten thousand galleons have been donated to the Order of the Phoenix, to 'assist in their ongoing efforts to combat dark wizards.' I guess the Minister being part of the Order does have some advantages. Now they can afford to have more people work for them, perhaps. It must be hard to hold down a normal job because of the hours. Now the Order can afford to pay its members if they need to."

That, Harry wasn't so sure would be the case. Hermione didn't know just how limited the members of the Order of the Phoenix really were, but Harry did. He doubted the ten thousand galleons would be given to the members just to pay for their time. Most likely, Dumbledore would gain control on it, and use it as he saw fit. And who knows how that man's mind worked.

Turning his attention back to his letter, Harry saw a small crowd gathering at the Hufflepuff table. A group of students were pushing their way in to sit next to Susan Bones, no doubt thanks to her new popularity of being the Minister's niece. Harry could only laugh at the

irony, and wasn't able to hold it in. Startled by the loud noise, some looked his way, and one of them happened to be Susan. She was looking decidedly uncomfortable with all the attention, and she sent a mock glare at Harry for laughing at her. He just smiled, and mouthed the words, "Now you know how I feel," right back at her. It was true too, and she just sighed before turning back to her breakfast. Currently, some second year Hufflepuff was buttering her toast for her, much to her annoyance.

Having opened the letter, Harry saw the same strange seal again on top of the letterhead, and this time recognized it as the seal of Gringott's bank. He'd never gotten a letter from the goblins before, but one look at the opening line on the short note told Harry all he needed to know about what the letter was about.

Dear Mr. Potter,

In accordance with his wishes, enclosed please find the key to the Black Family Vault, now your property as bequeathed to you by Sirius Black. As no doubt explained to you by Mr. Albus Dumbledore, who received a similar letter the day after Mr. Black's death in June, all funds and possessions have been left to you in accordance with his last will and testimony. Please accept our apologies for only now sending you a personal notice, but we could do so only after the new Minister of Magic recently reported his unconditional pardon. It was Mr. Black's wish that you not publicly be involved with his affairs, until such a time as he could be proved innocent. Until then, he wanted all legal matters handles through Mr. Dumbledore. We will require your presence at the Diagon Alley branch office sometime in the next two weeks to finalize paperwork, and there's no need to arrange an appointment. Simply ask for one of the seven bank managers, and please allow about two hours to review the sizable vault contents.

With regards,

Urenthor  
Senior Bank Manager, Gringotts, Diagon Alley

Huh? At first, Harry didn't know what the letter was talking about. Surely Sirius's family vault and all his available funds were seized by the Ministry once he was imprisoned? Then Harry read the letter over again, and looked over the old, tarnished, ornate key as well, and things became more clear. Harry still didn't know how it was possible for Sirius's vault to be active and now his, but he did understand the other name mentioned in the letter. Albus Dumbledore. Any surprise there? No, not really. Harry had learned too much about his Headmaster to be surprised that Dumbledore might have his manipulative hands in the situation, and Harry swore he'd meet with the goblins as soon as possible to figure out just how far Dumbledore's involvement went.

The rest of breakfast went by in a blur, as Harry was too focused on the ramifications of what the letter had meant to think about anything else. Because of this, Harry made a major slip in Arithmancy that morning, and for the first time, answered some of Professor Vector's questions incorrectly. Even Ginny, sitting next to Harry like always, looked concerned. Harry had never gotten any questions about the reading material wrong before. He told her after the first week of classes it was because he had already studied the material, not knowing that he couldn't enter sixth year classes until he took his OWL. That was believable enough, so Ginny just took Harry's high proficiency as normal. After all, if she was forced to repeat fourth year classes, she too would know the answers to most, if not all of the assigned readings.

After his blunder, Harry managed to focus his attention back on class, and he made some significant advances on his personal stunner. Since learning about the spell used to create Dementors from Seth, Harry had all but given up working on the personal stunning spell. Trying to find a way to stop the Dementors was so much more important. But because of the recent Diagon Alley attack, when a personal stunner could have came in handy, Harry decided to finish the spell quickly before returning work to the Dementors.

"Mr. Potter, would you stay after class please?" Professor Vector asked when the bell rang. Harry was already halfway to the door talking with Ginny, and it took a moment for what she said to register. Ginny offered to wait for him, but not knowing what the Professor

wanted, or how long it would take, Harry told Ginny to go on ahead. She had another class to attend still, and he was done for the day.

“Yes, Professor?” Harry asked. He couldn’t believe the two simple questions he had missed in class was reason enough to keep him behind class, especially considering his normal perfect behavior. Plus, he hadn’t any type of personal relationship with Professor Vector like he did with some of the other staff. Remus, Professor McGonagall, or even Snape had reasons to speak with Harry about personal matters. Professor Vector didn’t. Hell, Harry had never even talked to the lady before he’d taken her class.

“I noticed your attention was wavering in the beginning of class today, Mr. Potter,” she began. “And although it was only a slight mistake in your calculations, I was wondering if there were any problems you’ve been having?”

Harry thought for a moment how to answer, but figured the truth wouldn’t hurt. “Not really, Professor. I was just thrown a little this morning by an odd letter I received. Plus I didn’t sleep real well last night. I was out in the forest with Hagrid serving detention after a full day of classes, Quidditch practice, and a D.A. meeting, so it took a lot out of me. Sorry about the wrong answers I gave.”

Professor Vector only nodded slowly. She was a bit surprised that he was serving a detention when normally he seemed like such a role model student, but of course she did know of certain grudges her associate Professor Snape held. No doubt, he had something to do with the detention after such a busy day. “No trouble at all, Mr. Potter. I was just surprised is all, considering you’ve yet to miss a question or assignment. In fact, considering that you normally finish class work in a matter of minutes, and then work on your own equations, I’m surprised a single restless night was enough to cause your blunder.”

Harry’s eyes shot up from his desk, where he’d been looking, to the face of his Arithmancy professor. She looked momentarily amused, before continuing.

"Honestly, it looks as though it comes as a shock to you that I know. You didn't really think I wouldn't notice, did you? After nearly three months of class?"

Harry had the good sense to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "it's just that I expected to enter sixth year level classes, and I studied real hard this summer to catch up on the work I missed. It wasn't till the first day of school that Professor McGonagall told me I'd have to attend a fifth year class. In all honesty, I've done all the reading and year's equations already. So when I finish early, I just work on some other stuff."

"I am aware, Mr. Potter. Minerva informed me of the situation before our first class together, and after our first month of classes, I knew that you already knew the material. In fact, from the time it takes you to complete your assignments in class, I expect you've done a fair bit of work in sixth year level material as well, haven't you?"

Harry nodded. He felt real uncomfortable; not because he had been caught doing advanced work in class, but because he thought the teacher hadn't caught on.

"As I expected," she continued. "In fact, I expect that you'd do well in sixth year Arithmancy, or possibly even in class with the seventh year students. Only three other students do I consider to be knowledgeable beyond their current level. Hermione Granger, your friend I believe, and Terry Boot are both perfectly capable of moving onto seventh year material, as you might be. The other is a third year Ravenclaw who already entered Hogwarts with OWL level knowledge, seeing as her mother works as a spell creator for the Ministry. However, while I might be able to convince the Headmaster to promote them in their studies, you unfortunately are unable to advance to take sixth year level classes without sitting for your OWL exam. It's because of this that I allow you to work on your own as long as your assignments are complete and satisfactory. I'll allow you to continue this as well, as long as you spend the time on school studies. While I prefer you to work on advanced Arithmancy, I recognize you might become bored or overworked with so much Arithmancy. Feel free to complete your other subjects' homework if you like. Just make sure to keep to

school related work only, and that doesn't include Quidditch. Understand?"

Harry was smiling now. He thought he'd be in trouble for working on his own, but as it turns out it wasn't a problem at all.

"Thank you, Professor. Actually, I haven't even been working on other subjects in class; only Arithmancy. I set a project early in the summer that I'm almost complete with, and that's what I've been working on."

That seemed to perk Professor Vector's interest, and she asked Harry what he'd been working on. Clearly the Dementor spell was out of the question, but Harry had no reservations about telling her about the personal stunner. He even told her why he thought to modify the spell in the first place, as it would have proved to be advantageous during his fight in the Department of Mysteries.

"I'm most impressed, Harry. Is it OK that I call you that?" Harry nodded. He much preferred his first name to "Mr. Potter." "Mr. Potter" sounded almost as bad as "Boy." Maybe it had to do with Snape only referring to him by last name. "Harry" was just much more comfortable.

"Spell modification is NEWT level work, and the personal modification you're adding, while potentially useful as you've pointed out, has no real market value. I'm surprised you're pouring so much time and energy into a spell that can't be marketed."

Harry just cocked his head. Market Value? "Professor Vector, what do you mean about marketing a spell? I'm just developing this so no one else can revive someone I've stunned."

"Well," she explained, "personal modifications to spells, while relatively easy enough to engineer, have no demand from the Ministry for development because they only work for the person who completed the spell work. Simply put, once you finish the spell, it will only work for you. All the calculations, whether you realize it or not, are more individual than you know. You'll learn more about that in seventh year. That's why it's rare for a spell to be personally modified. It only works for the spell creator. Even after you're done, the spell

will only work for you. If I tried to cast it, for example, it wouldn't work. Sure, I could use your notes to modify the spell myself, but it would still take some time. That's what I meant by not having a high market value. The Ministry usually pays spell creators for their completed formulas, but only if they're usable by the general public. Spells that are only made for portions of the public, like a contraception charm for females perhaps, don't fetch as high of a price. A completely personal spell, like the one you're developing, would sell for hardly anything at all. A few sickles at the most, perhaps."

Harry's head was swimming with too much information after he left Arithmancy that day. After her explanation the value of Harry's personal stunner, Professor Vector went on to explain to Harry the worth of the different classes of spells, and the Ministry guidelines and repercussions for creating such formulas. His spell, for instance, could be considered illegal to use, if he wasn't willing to reverse it, and was not a licensed auror or hit-wizard. Because naturally, stunning someone in the middle of a street, and not having anyone else be able to revive them, could be classified just as bad as death. What if Harry were injured, or died, or was just unwilling to reverse the spell. Yes, too much information.

Harry had spent one whole free period discussing spell creation with Professor Vector, so lunch was only minutes away. The weight of the Gringott's letter still in his pocket, Harry made his way to Remus's office. He wanted to ask if the man had the afternoon free, like he did, so he could get the trip over with. Plus, having Remus on hand might be beneficial, considering they'd be discussing Sirius's estate. Remus might have some inside information to offer, and he could provide some emotional support if it was needed. And Harry didn't know a thing about inheritance, so perhaps Remus would be able to look out for his interests, in case the goblins weren't. At the least, Harry knew there was no way he would be allowed to go to Gringotts on his own during school hours. Yes, he could escape on his own, but he'd probably be publicly sighted, so it was best if everything was legal.

"Remus," Harry called out, entering the office without even knocking. A student had just left from a tutoring session on his way to lunch no doubt, and Harry could see that no one else was in the office. "Do

you have some free time this afternoon? I need to make a trip into Diagon Alley, and I'm sure the Order would like to provide an escort."

Remus thought he was joking, so Harry had to quickly explain about the Gringott's letter requesting his presence sometime in the next two weeks. Seeing as how the meeting couldn't wait until the winter holidays, it only stood to reason that Harry would have to leave school at some point. And since he hadn't any classes Friday afternoons, it really was the best time.

"Well, I do have one meeting scheduled with a third year Hufflepuff about History, but I suppose I could reschedule that for Monday. She just wanted to go over her essay about a goblin rebellion before class on Wednesday, but we'll have plenty of time before then. So, I see no problem, as long as you're allowed. I'm not an official Hogwarts professor, so I can't give official permission for you to leave campus. You'll have to ask Professor Dumbledore or McGonagall first."

Harry nodded. "I'm going to ask them at lunch, but I don't really see a problem. Is it OK if we leave right after eating? The letter said it might take some time, and I want to get back as early as possible. How about I meet you in your office right after lunch, and we leave from here?"

Remus agreed, and Harry made his way up to Gryffindor tower. He didn't want to wear his school robes into town, so he packed an extra pair in his school bag, and barely made it to lunch to find a decent seat. Ginny asked him about staying after class, and at the mention of Arithmancy, Hermione joined in the conversation as well. Harry explained to his friends about the extra work he'd been doing, and how Vector said she'd allow him to continue, and how impressed she was also. Ginny wasn't too enthused about the extra work Harry had admitted to, but Hermione was ecstatic. She could tell him all about personal spell modifications of course, and went on to describe some of the more popular spell theories and categories she'd heard of. Ron was starting to roll his eyes at her diatribe, and Harry knew he had to shut her up somehow fast, before Ron would be less tactful about it.

"Hermione," Harry interrupted her, "do you know that Professor Vector said that besides me, only three other Arithmancy students

were capable of advancing levels in their study, and one of them was you. She said you and Terry were the best students in her class, and both of you would easily fit in with the seventh year students."

It was a nasty trick, but it worked. Hermione blushed immediately at the praise, and forgot what she was saying about Ministry guidelines. Ron started a conversation about the hair dying potion he'd learned to brew earlier that week, and all were happy again.

A foot from under the table nudged Harry's leg as he bit into his tuna salad, and from across the table, he saw Ginny smiling his way. "Good job," she said. Harry just gave a short laugh back. Ron wanted to know what had been so funny, but neither would tell him. When Ron started to huff about the indignation of it all, Harry and Ginny only laughed harder. This time, it took Hermione's interruption to calm things down.

Right after lunch, Harry headed to the Transfiguration classroom with the second year Slytherins and Hufflepuffs. The class didn't know what he was doing there, but left him alone. They were too busy cramming for a quiz before the bell rang. Humorously, Harry noticed that they were turning rats into goblets that week.

"Mr. Potter" Professor McGonagall addressed from the front of the classroom, "I do believe you're in the wrong class, unless you'd like to repeat third year, that is?"

There was a small tittering of laughter from the students, but Harry didn't mind. It was unusual for someone to interrupt a class they didn't belong to. But since the bell hadn't yet rung, Harry didn't feel that bad.

Approaching her desk, Harry drew out the letter he'd received that morning and showed it to her. After explaining his intention and need of visiting Gringotts, he asked her permission.

"So you see Professor, Mr. Lupin (he didn't want to say Remus in front of the third years) already agreed to accompany me, as long as I got permission first. Seeing as I don't have an afternoon class, and I have only two weeks to contact them, I thought this would be as good

of a time as any. Since you're my Head of House, I figured I'd ask you."

"I think this is something you should ask the Headmaster, Harry. I'd feel much more comfortable if he were informed about this."

Harry had expected that in an answer, but was prepared. Pointing to the section of the letter that mentioned 'As no doubt explained to you by Mr. Albus Dumbledore,' he said, "Professor Dumbledore already knows about it, you see. I just don't want to have to make the trip all the way up to his office, be forced to eat a sherbet lemon, and then argue with a bunch of retired Headmaster and Headmistress portraits before reminding him of why I'd come. Remus is hoping to not miss any tutor sessions, and I want to return to school as early as possible. I thought that coming to you would just be faster."

The bell had just rung, and McGonagall was arranging papers on her desk, not paying full attention to Harry anymore. "Well, if the Headmaster knows about this, as you say, then I see no problem. I expect to see you back for dinner though. Don't use this excuse to escape into muggle London for a fast food meal, or to stay further and shop. Straight to Gringotts and back, is that understood?"

Harry smiled as he left for the door. Over his shoulder he called out, "Perfectly, Professor McGonagall. I'll just be going now." Harry wanted to leave as quickly as possible before Dumbledore got wind of this. The old man never was left long not knowing a secret in his school. However, Harry thought of something, and just couldn't resist teasing his Head of House about it. Turning back to face her, with the door held open, Harry asked, "Oh, Professor! Did you ever get to try those Warheads Professor Dumbledore has?"

McGonagall froze from arranged her desk at mention of the muggle sweet. Slowly picking her head up to look at him, Harry thought he saw a brief grin before her lips pressed into their familiar expression. "Mr. Potter, those are the most vile and disgusting concoction I've ever been forced to sample at the Headmaster's request. If you had anything to do with introducing them to him, or provided them either, it would behoove you to do so no longer."

Harry thought she might have said more, but Harry was about to burst out laughing, and quickly closed the door behind him before he could. Laughing at McGonagall's discomfort, while perhaps being acceptable if they were peers and in private, was not appropriate in a full classroom of her pupils.

Once he had her permission, Harry made quick work of exiting the school grounds. He met Remus in his office only making a quick stop in the boy's lav to change robes. Remus didn't mind holding Harry's book bag in his office while they were gone, and soon the two were leaving the front doors to the castle. Not needing to travel illegally or covertly, Harry suggested the easiest way to get to Diagon Alley would be to walk to the Three Broomsticks, and floo to the Leaky Cauldron. Remus knew that Harry could apparate, but since he wasn't licensed, the floo network was agreed upon.

Neither Urenthor or Gliptrot was the bank manager on duty that day, but an elderly goblin by the name of Vladenski (or Vlad, for short) was available. He escorted Harry into the comfortable office, and asked Remus to join them at Harry's insistence. Normally Harry wouldn't be required to have an escort, but because Harry felt he had nothing to hide from Remus, the goblin saw no reason to forbid it.

It took over an hour to explain to Harry what all of the paperwork was, and what it all meant. Basically, Sirius had left everything to him as sole beneficiary. This was all explained in the letter that Dumbledore received the day after Sirius's death, just because Sirius figured Dumbledore to be the temporary guardian of Harry at the time. He fully expected that Dumbledore would explain the situation to his godson, as well as the inheritance, until a permanent guardianship was worked out. It surprised the goblin, but not Harry or Remus, that Dumbledore had never even mentioned the letter.

A wizard's will wasn't much like a muggle one, Harry learned. There was no statement from the deceased, or a gathering of beneficiaries to hear the departed's wishes. Instead, a bank or wizarding lawyer was left with a set of instructions to be followed. In Sirius's case he left instructions with Gringotts, as he didn't know he'd ever be pardoned at the time he wrote them. Gringott's laws were noticeably different than wizard ones were, Harry made note.

That's the reason why Sirius's funds were never seized. Because as result of the last goblin rebellions, goblins had been left in complete control of all wizard banks, and the banks functioned under goblin law, not wizard. Therefore, Sirius's imprisonment in Azkaban for twelve years had no bearing at all on his accounts. In fact, because a majority of funds had been left untouched in long-term investments upon Sirius's capture, he'd actually done real well for himself. Now it even made sense how Sirius had afforded to buy Harry a Firebolt his third year, just months after escaping prison. After all, if his accounts were frozen or seized, how would he have been able to afford such a broom? There was a downside to the laws too, Harry thought. Sirius wasn't the only one who applied to such laws. What about all the real criminals captured? Hmm, Harry would have to think further about that later.

The trip to the vault (lower level, number seventy three) was just a formality to place the vault key in the door, and key Harry's signature into the security circle. The key would remain in the vault doors until his death or he decided to transfer ownership to another. It was in the office above, after the quick trip to the vault had been made, that Harry found out all the interesting stuff.

One, besides the vault's contents, Harry was also left the residence at Grimmauld Place (and all it contained), and a small vacation property on a small Mediterranean island. Two, while technically Harry inherited everything himself, Sirius had left instructions for him to spread some wealth around, as Sirius would have liked. Sirius knew that Remus was too proud to accept money for new robes, or that the Weasleys were too stubborn to accept a little help for being so kind to Harry over the years when he couldn't, so he instructed Gringotts to instruct Harry to do these things on his behalf. As Harry had more than enough money in his own vaults, he didn't think spending some of Sirius's on others would be a problem. And thirdly, and most excitingly, Sirius had already signed permission for Harry to spend the vault's contents however he'd wished. Being an underage wizard, normally that couldn't happen. But since Sirius was the boy's legal guardian, and he had drafted the document before his death, it was binding. Therefore Harry had unlimited access to the Black Family Vault, unlike his own.

It didn't take too long to sign all the appropriate paperwork once the situation was fully explained to him. The vault was just as filled with money and oddities as the Potter vault was, and Harry was encouraged to return at his convenience to more thoroughly go through the vault's contents. Investments, shares of companies, and "questionable items of interest" all demanded attention, according to Vlad. Harry knew from his brief trip to the vault that there was hardly any room to sort out the vault's contents, and asked Vlad what could be done about that. The vault would sit untouched for now, but Harry promised that he'd dedicate some time during his holiday vacation to attend to the business the goblin recommended. However, he'd need proper room.

"Well," Vlad said, "I suggest you open another account, to use for that purpose. We have a line of vaults that offer much more space, but not as much prestige or exclusiveness as the lower level of vaults. Still, they're perfectly well guarded and maintained, and as it could prove to be only a temporary account for you until you sort the Black Vault content, I think it's just the solution."

With Remus's help, so that he knew he wasn't being ripped off, Harry agreed to the vault. His only question was if house-elves were allowed access on their own. It wasn't a normal request, but as long as Harry gave permission, and a goblin oversaw the visits, it wouldn't be a problem. Since Harry thought he'd assign Dobby the task of going through some of the Black assets while he was still at school, Harry did give permission, for both him and Winky, just in case. Harry also requested that Griphook be in charge of dealing with the elves or Harry, if a problem arose. Harry was already comfortable with the goblin, and now that he was no longer chaperoning wizards in mine carts, he thought that Griphook might like the added bonus. It was part of the new vault's fee to give the managing goblin a bonus, and Harry thought Griphook would appreciate the gesture, even if he might have to deal with an excited Dobby on occasion.

After another round of paperwork was signed and filed, Vlad handed Harry his new vault key. It was different than his others, much larger, and Harry asked about it.

"Oh, you see sir, this line of vaults is just as old as most within our walls, it's just that they've only been accessible to the wizarding public for two hundred years or so. Before then, they were used mainly for trolls and giants; hence their size. Now however, with the giants leaving the United Kingdom, and trolls becoming less intelligent due to inbreeding, we've no need for so many vaults to remain unoccupied. Yours for instance is only the 833rd vault in the B line of nearly three thousand."

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Harry tried to convince Remus to spend the afternoon buying new robes, but at his refusal, the two returned to Hogwarts by way of floo right before dinner started. Harry just had enough time to pick up his bag in Remus's office, run back to his dorm room to drop off his books, and change back to his school robes, before his friends dragged him back down the staircase.

Dinner was a terse affair, not because Harry didn't enjoy the food, but because Remus, Professor McGonagall, and Dumbledore were all shooting glares in Harry's direction. Apparently, they had figured out that Dumbledore didn't really know about the trip, regardless of what his letter had said. Harry didn't care though. "Serves him right," Harry mumbled through a mouthful of potatoes. "Old coot should have told me months ago, when he got his letter about Sirius. Besides, I had to go anyway."

After dinner, before he could escape back up to the sanctity of his common room, or better yet his trunk, Professor McGonagall caught up with Harry and told him he was expected in the Headmaster's office. No surprise really, but Harry was tired. He thought he'd at least be allowed to wait until morning to have this discussion. Sulking, Harry made his way to the familiar gargoyle.

Dumbledore was alone, and right from the start expressed his disappointment in Harry.

"Harry, why did you lead Professor McGonagall to believe that I approved your going to Diagon Alley today? I did no such thing, and what's more is you should know that I wouldn't of."

Harry wasn't going to take it though. He'd not done anything wrong, and Dumbledore was just upset that Harry had once again discovered something the Headmaster was hiding from him before he had a chance to run damage control. He said as much.

"You should have told me this was going to happen months ago, when you got your letter. Do you know that the bank manager was actually surprised that I didn't know a thing about what I was doing there today? It takes a lot to surprise a goblin, too. I felt like an idiot, being so unprepared. You had no right to keep this from me. Sirius left his wealth to me, not that I want it, and I have to find out from a bloody owl when you've known for months!"

Pretending not to notice Harry's raised voice, Dumbledore replied. "The reason I didn't discuss the letter with you earlier, is because it contains more information than you should be privy to; Order of the Phoenix information. Then when you went missing, I became convinced that you hadn't the maturity to be allowed access to so much money. Truth be told, I'm still not sure, as you still refuse to share any information about where you've been with me. I can only imagine you wanting to spend your next summer on that Mediterranean island, where nobody is available to look out for you. At least at Grimmauld Place there will be Order members around all summer, as well as the Weasleys."

"I'm not going back to that place!" Harry said furiously. "I've told you that already. In fact, since I now own it, I'm free to do with it whatever I want. Maybe I will check out that vacation home. You know, get a tan, meet some local girls; the stuff normal teenagers get to do. You'd have me locked up like a prisoner with Buckbeak!"

"Harry," Dumbledore sighed, "we'll discuss where you spend next summer later, when you've had more time to think about your safety. This is hardly the time to be making decisions, as you're clearly agitated. Perhaps it's been a mistake these past few weeks to pretend like all our problems have been solved, when visibly they're not."

"You don't get it, do you?" Harry asked. He'd calmed down some, but was still adamant about trying to get Dumbledore to understand. "We won't be discussing anything of the sort. I already know where I'm spending next summer. And since my visit to Gringotts today, I'm also already in complete control of Sirius's assets. The only way you're going to learn my plans about any of it is to stop treating me like a helpless child, and recognize it's my own life we're talking about here. It isn't decided by majority rule. There's only one vote, and it's mine. So until you recognize that, I don't think I have much more to say to you. Seeing as I got proper permission from my Head of House to visit Gringotts as I needed to within two weeks anyway, and I went properly accompanied as well, I don't think you have any grounds to punish me. And with that said, I don't think we have anything else to discuss."

Dumbledore looked old once again. Harry had gotten better at keeping his temper, and arguing with an emotional child, breaking furniture and magical instruments, was much easier to deal with than a calculating and rational equal. "Harry, for now why don't we just give ourselves some space and time to think about what would be best for all concerned? Then, at the beginning of next summer, we'll move you to Grimmauld Place where we'll discuss your future living arrangements. At least you won't have to move back in with the Dursleys. I think that should show you I'm not totally unreasonable. Hopefully by then, you'll have settled down some to talk reasonably."

Harry just laughed in frustration. No matter what he did, no matter what he said, Dumbledore just didn't get it. Well, he had tried. Now he much didn't care anymore. 'I know,' Harry had a quick idea, 'maybe this will open his eyes up some. I'm sure Sirius wouldn't mind, and it won't really inconvenience anyone.'

Harry stood up to leave. "Professor Dumbledore, my stand now had been the same for months. No amount of time is going to change my mind. So no, I won't be moving into Grimmauld Place next summer, because it won't even be mine any longer. I plan to sell the property the first opportunity I get. I'll allow the Order to continue using it until the winter holidays, and then I'm afraid you'll have to move out. I request that you remove the Fidelius Charm as well by then. Hopefully I'll get a good price, and will never have to set foot in the

hell-house again. I'm sure Sirius would feel the same way, seeing as it held so many unpleasant memories for him. I'm sure you can find another suitable location to hold Order meetings. If not, perhaps you can put those ten thousand galleons you arranged the Ministry to give you 'on behalf of Sirius' to work. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get to sleep early tonight; I've had a long week."

As he left Harry heard Dumbledore sigh into his hands, but Harry didn't care. He tried expressing his feelings and opinions to the old man, and he got nothing but grief and more lies back in return for his honesty. If it took selling Grimmauld Place to uproot his power position and show him that Harry was capable of making his own decisions, then so be it. Harry only hoped Ron would forgive him for selling the place after he'd spent so long ridding it of doxies.

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There was another early morning Quidditch practice Saturday, and Harry let Ginny run it completely, as he just sat in the stands watching. He wasn't in the mood for having fun. He had too much pent up frustration. Acknowledging that, Harry decided what to do. After all, what better way was there to make yourself feel better than to interrogate a bunch of Death Eaters.

Sean Hazelton had been very quiet in the weeks since his interrogation. Harry had checked up on him at least once a day in addition to the elves, although Sean wasn't aware. Harry only hoped the others would soon follow his example.

Avery was the loudest and most vocal of the new Death Eaters. His Achilles tendons hadn't healed properly, and he was now permanently hobbled. The first man Harry had captured in the Diagon Alley attack, the one he'd punched in the face, wasn't known to Harry. He had suffered a broken nose, and again it hadn't healed properly. Harry didn't care if these men became disfigured or not, as long as they were kept alive. It was more mercy then they showed their victims.

There was another unknown man, and then two more that Harry did recognize: Crabbe and Goyle senior. Goyle's face had been badly

burnt from Harry's fire spell, and already new baby pink skin was forming over the scabs. Crabbe and the other man were left unharmed, although those two were taking isolation the worst. Avery, Goyle, and the first still yelled and demanded to be seen whenever they were fed, but the other two had stopped days ago. At first they had yelled like the rest, but then they cried, and then there was silence.

Having the rest of the day to himself, Harry spent a lot of time questioning each man. He chained each up before entering their cells like he had with Hazelton, but these hardened men he didn't offer a meal or pity. They had done more than just that of their initiation into the fold; they were true monsters. Harry had brewed a batch of successful Veritaserum by then, and used it willingly. The men didn't even know they were under the potion's effects. Harry had stunned each man before entering the cells, to chain them to the walls. Before he revived them, he slipped three drops of the clear liquid into their mouths. The men might guess why they were being so truthful, but as long as they didn't witness the illegal administration, there was no way for them to later testify against Harry.

The two men Harry wasn't familiar with gave up very little. They were new to Voldemort's ranks; being too young to be in service during his last rise in power, but were willing followers all the same. They knew mostly low level Death Eaters like themselves, and some of the inner circle, but not much else. They were just the working class Death Eaters, not meant to hold Voldemort's great secrets.

Crabbe and Goyle knew little more. More intelligent than their sons, they gave up some of their comrades, and told Harry about some of the students at Hogwarts their sons were supposed to keep an eye out for. It was a list of possible initiates, he was told. Harry recognized most of the names, and was even surprised by a few. Taking the names down on parchment, Harry promised to let Remus crosscheck the list against his own later.

Avery of course had the most useful information to give. He could name every single member of Voldemort's inner circle, and provide locations and addresses of them as well. He also knew the location of Voldemort's two bases of operations. Both were unplottable, and only

allowed the Death Eaters to apparate when summoned by the Dark Mark, but Avery knew where an emergency portkey was kept. The portkey was to be used in case the inner circle had to meet if Voldemort was ever captured or killed. Voldemort didn't consider that a possibility, but he'd been beaten once before already. So while he didn't know of the portkey's existence, a few of the inner circle did. It was actually Lucius Malfoy and Walden Macnair that created it.

There were many other secrets as well, and it was hours before Harry exhausted his list of questions. He'd only stopped to eat a small meal and have a short practice session with his double, and then continued with the interrogation. At four in the afternoon, when the last of the Veritaserum's effects wore off the last prisoner, Harry stunned all six. Releasing them from their bonds, the only other thing he did was pluck a few hairs from the top of each of their heads.

Yes, it was Harry under the disguise of polyjuice that entered Gringotts the next day, after taking his portkey in the Forbidden Forest, and then apparating away undetected. Avery was the first vial he drank from, and the taste hadn't gotten any better in the four years since he'd last drank the vile potion. Polyjuice was one of the potions Harry kept in stock, and he had just enough to make six small vials of the different Death Eaters.

It was the explanation of Sirius's will that got Harry thinking. If Death Eaters, even convicted ones, still had access to their money and vaults, then what was to stop them from going into hiding, or continuing to live like normal? If they didn't have the funds they were used to however, it would make things much more difficult.

So Harry had questioned each Death Eater about their finances. Besides the normal family vaults, most had a separate account for their spouses, and their children as well. Avery even had a few hidden vaults his family didn't know about. And all of them, excluding Sean Hazelton, had a V vault.

The V vault line, as any Gringott's bank manager could explain, was an exclusive series of vaults set up nearly fifty years ago by a powerful young wizard named Tom Riddle. The goblins at the time didn't know what the "V" stood for, but over time had come to guess.

Now however, they were bound to honor the original agreement, and could do nothing to stop Voldemort's closest followers from accessing their V vaults. Each Death Eater of enough importance was issued one, and it was a private account except for one exception. Tom Riddle had access to all of them, and could withdraw or deposit money freely if it suited him. For the past two years he had only withdrawn of course, but what he promised his followers in the future was enough justification for what he took. The V vaults were Voldemort's lifeline; the money off which he lived. Once Harry found that out, he knew he couldn't leave the money there for his enemy to use. So that's when Harry forged his plan.

So acting like a complete ass to the goblins, much as he imagined Avery might himself, Harry had made the first request to transfer all of Avery's funds to vault 833B. It wasn't originally what he had in mind for his new vault, but it would do. Harry didn't feel bad for Avery's family, either. His wife and kids had thrown their hat in with that lot years ago, and still had enough material possessions to get by. Perhaps their newly discovered poverty would even show them humility?

Crabbe was the next flask Harry drank from, not five minutes after he left the bank as Avery. He simply transfigured his robes to fit his new portly body, and waited a few minutes more before repeating the process.

After seeing how startled the goblin manger was, Harry waited longer the next time, before retuning as Goyle. He spent an hour simply roaming the streets, thinking about the reaction Voldemort would have when he discovered five of his Death Eaters missing, as well as their money. Would he think they fled his service? Or would he know they've been caught, just not by whom? Harry could only wonder.

And so the process was repeated over the next few hours. Harry would enter the bank in the form of one of his captured wizards, use his knowledge obtained through interrogation to deplete the wizards of all their funds, and drink a new vial of another Polyjuice Potion. The extra he kept (clearly labeled) just in case he might need it one day, and as Harry portkeyed back into the Room of Requirement,

where he had left from, Harry couldn't help but be pleased with himself.

Returning to Gryffindor Tower to get ready to travel back in time, Harry met his friends in their usually place by the fire. They'd given him a wide berth this weekend since his apparent bad mood started to show early Friday morning. They had asked about the letter that night, and after repeating his conversation with Dumbledore, they let him have his space Saturday and Sunday. Now though, he seemed to be in happier spirits, and Ginny greeted him as he plopped down in an empty armchair.

"Hey Harry, ready for your patrol tonight? Cami said she found a new broom cupboard she heard is a hot spot. Up for a little investigating later?"

Harry just smiled. "As long as I don't find you and some random Slytherin or Ravenclaw in there, I'll be fine for tonight."

Ginny laughed while at the same time turning red, and Ron snorted into the pumpkin juice he'd been drinking. "What have I told you about mentioning that again Harry?" Ron demanded. "I said never to mention it again. I guess you're felling better than, seeing as you're no longer moody?"

Harry could only nod. "Well Ron, I've had an interesting day, that's for sure, but I think things might be looking up."

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#### AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, that's chapter 20 for you! I hope I had a lot of people guessing about eh beginning part. I know a lot of you in my yahoo group were discussing all types of possibilities, and I don't think I read one that was even close to being correct. Things are also picking up if you haven't noticed. My next major events will be happening around Christmas in the story, and that will be only a few chapters from now. So please, review and let me know what you think. And thanks to those of you who write and let me know about those darned typos I

keep on making. Not having a beta, it's hard sometimes. But one of these days I promise to go through and clean up all my mistakes. Until then, I hope my writing's clear enough to understand. Later all!

Molly Morrison – Thanks for your perceived input. I've been waiting for your opinion since your last review, when you noticed something wrong. I agree about the action, and have to think more about the adult interaction. Harry's just a teen still, so when he does interact with other characters, it's normally other teens. We'll be seeing more of Remus though from now on, and more DE captures, so I guess that will help solve the problem. Thanks for keeping me on my toes.

Darkmoore – I realize about the multiple time tuners (two now, but three during the summer), and I think I mentioned that there was carved out spaces for them in the copy of Hogwarts: A History that Harry used to hide them. If I didn't, I'll make that correction on my Schnoogle revision. And about spell/grammar check. Like I've said many times before, I don't have any betas, nor do I want any at this point. Still, the few mistakes I do make are minimal, and don't distract from the story. If someone wants to pay me to make my work perfect, than I'll be happy to go back and spend countless hours proofreading. Until then, everyone will just have to deal with the level I've hit. And if it bothers you, then read the Schnoogle version. By the way, I've noticed your own fics have problems maintaining the same tense throughout. See, it's a universal problem. Nobody's perfect.

Professor Loganberry – Since Hogwarts serves food buffet style, I think it's reasonable for a chicken and beef dish to both be on the table. Maybe Harry just really likes Yorkshire pudding? I know I sometimes go crazy, and have chicken flavored StoveTop Stuffing with a pork dish. A wild and crazy guy, I am.

DragonStorm316 – Thanks for the complement. It's funny really, that I'm doing a successful job of portraying all my characters' emotions, when I myself am very unemotional. Seriously, I don't ever get mad or happy, I'm just in a constant state of zen. Maybe I'm just writing how I'd like to be able to react. Who knows, but I'm glad that it works for you.

Tanydwr – Um, I was kidding about the “too many reviews.” Actually, I’m getting kind of nervous because the number per chapter has gone down. I hope it’s only because PoA was recently released, and that it will go back up shortly. And no I don’t mind you talking about your own fic, as long as it doesn’t become a habit. I actually started to read it a few weeks ago, but stopped after Ch. 5 or so. I just didn’t like the fact that everyone accepted that she had lived a whole, muggle life in the future, and knew all about them. You didn’t spend enough time developing the characters as you introduced them, and suddenly she’s got parents, brothers, Sirius and James, all acting like best friends, and that the coma never happened. If you ever do a rewrite, spend more time explaining the situation right after she wakes up in St. Mungo’s, and is reintroduced to everyone.

Lauren – Do you know this is your first review in many that hasn’t had a negative thing to say? I guess that means I’m getting better, so I bow to your appreciation of my “genius that is Ross’ writing skills.” I still think you’re nuts though. Glad you liked the Warhead. I almost didn’t include it because it’s mentions pop references, but I thought the situation was very in-character for Dumble to try a new lemon sweet. I do add a bit of humor at least once per chapter like that, but you must remember that this isn’t a humor story. If you need another dose, go back and read chapter 7. Or better yet, have you visited some of the links on my Yahoo group? Two are for stories (one is a hilarious H/HR ship) that are entirely humorous, and should appease your appetite. Speaking about H/Hr, I don’t care if pictures of the PoA premiere have Emma and Dan rounding third base; that still says nothing about Harry and Hermione in cannon. Sorry, luv!

Cobalt 45 – This has never been an angsty fic, and it’s not turning into one. So Harry won’t get too hung up on Amber’s death. As for total number of chapters, I’m guessing about 30-35. Fic will be over 400,000 words for sure. I’m going to limit my sequels to 250,000 words though. Being too long-winded is one of my biggest mistakes.

Snitch20 – I haven’t seen you in a while, so it’s good to hear from you. You’re one of my first reviewers you know. Yeah, I don’t like that full blown love stuff either, that’s why so far I’ve made Harry/Ginny’s relationship purely physical. And Cho’s still in the wings too, you know. Sorry you didn’t like the teaser, but that’s what they’re there for.

I won't do too many in the future, and when I do, you always have the option of not reading them. If you can really do that? I know I couldn't.

N/A – Sorry to burst your bubble, but Set was not the God of Chaos. Egyptian mythology, to my knowledge (and I have a book right in front of me), doesn't even have one of those. You might be thinking about Nun and Naunet, primeval deities that were part of the eight gods who "created the world." They are abstract concepts, not gods strictly speaking, but are both sometimes credited with snake-like appearances. No, according to the text I'm reading, "Set represented the cosmic opposition of darkness and light." True at times he appeared more evil than others, but that's just the constant evolution of Egyptian mythology. In fact, at times they have multiple gods merging into one. I'm just writing all this to show you I have done some research about my writing. Plus, I'm a big fan of "Stargate," which delves deeply into Egyptian mythology.

Jeffreyf – It may seem like low power level spells to you, but remember, Harry wasn't trying to fight, he was using guerilla warfare. Sneaking up on the enemy and then stunning them. When Avery found him out we might have seen some advanced magic, but he didn't have his wand at that point. Don't worry, you'll see some major ass kicking in the future. I'm saving it for the end.

Numba1 – Don't blame Ginny for Amber's death. The crack I made about killing her to pave the way for Ginny was just a joke. I can see that you don't like H/G ships, but like I've always said, this isn't an official one. It will just be more H/G than anything else.

Neo - Last chapter was only the second time I've used a flashback. And when it does happen, it's supposed to be surprising. In my opinion, it keeps my writing from becoming stagnant, and throws a few twists into my writing style to set me apart from others.

HermioneGreen – Sorry you had to restart the chapter so many times because of the length. I do realize they're starting to get away from me. The last one was the longest yet at 22,000 words (30 pages), and I've seen whole fics that aren't that long! I can only hope I'll be able to limit most future chapters to 20 pages, which was my original goal.

Bluetattingman – Sorry, but I have thought my fic out quite thoroughly. The Ministry is corrupt and inept, so Harry has decided to take on more responsibility himself, even if that means breaking some laws. This certainly isn't the first fic to do that, nor will it be the last. I don't see him becoming a comic-book hero, nor is he torturing his prisoners. In fact, without the effects of Dementors, he's treating them better than Azkaban would, which is where they belong in the first place. Don't blame me because the wizarding world is harsh on its inmates. I do thank you though for your honesty, though. You're the first negative review I've gotten in months, and I was starting to think that odd.

Qwesntarr – Sorry, but I can only answer that question so many times. Just scroll back through the AN's, and I'm sure you'll see me addressing Harry's aging at least 5 times.

Coolwhip0306 – I mentioned Grawp a few chapters back. He's living in France now with Maxine, and Hagrid visits whenever he wants thanks to a portkey set up by Dumbledore. Having him in the Forbidden Forrest was just doing more damage to the already strained relationship with the centaurs. Still, because of the portkey he's in reachable distance. Don't worry, you'll see more of him soon.

I don't respond to everyone's reviews personally, just those that have comments or questions. Especially now that I'm receiving so many reviews per chapter, I just can't fit them all in. So if you've written to say you liked my story and are waiting for more, than thank you.

I also now have a Yahoo! group addressing new updates my story, as well as pictures, info about live chats, etc. If interested, please visit. A link to the site is on my bio page.

## Chapter 21 – As Time Passes

After that first week in November when Harry worked through his feelings about Amber's death; the weekend when he emptied the captured Death Eaters' bank accounts; time seemed to fly by for him and his friends. School was over two months in session, and the students couldn't use the excuse "I'm still getting used to my schedule" anymore; not that Hermione ever used that one, but Ron often did.

Harry was still upset that Amber had been a casualty of an attack that was mainly a distraction for the break out at Azkaban, but just like he had with Cedric and Sirius, he pushed his emotions to the back of his mind, and instead concentrated on achieving his end goals. The quicker he worked to train and learn, so he could stop Voldemort and his Death Eaters, the less likely innocent people like Amber would have to die or be hurt anymore. With that in mind, Harry renewed his training regimen with a passion.

He cut back on his extra study sessions with Ginny and Luna to help them out with their OWL subjects, but not completely. Actually, he enjoyed the time spent with the two fifth years and Hermione, as it was one of the rare times each week that he didn't have to push at his limits, and could instead rest on his laurels, and reflect on what he already knew.

Harry's many massage sessions were also cut down to only once a week, as it really was impractical for he and Ginny to spend an extra hour after every one of their Quidditch practices, four times a week. They had almost five weeks until their next game against Hufflepuff, and Harry thought he might even talk to Ginny about cutting back to only three practices a week.

Before that game though, Hufflepuff first had to take on Ravenclaw in mid-November, it what was expected to be a very exiting game. In previous years, Hufflepuff had never been much of a match for the other school teams, and Cho Chang as Ravenclaw's team captain and seeker easily led the Bronze Eagles to trounce on the Badgers. This year however, the Hufflepuff seeker Summerby, who it had been rumored practiced almost daily over the summer, was actually caught

flying by the opposing team, and the rumors were proved true. He was excellent! Perhaps not as great of a flier as Harry or even Cho was, but certainly nothing to laugh at or dismiss.

After he'd been caught flying around the pitch by Ravenclaw, he saw no reason to keep the secret anymore that he had much improved. Word quickly spread that Summerby had attended the Puddlemore United Jr. training camp over the summer; an honor offered to many, but only affordable to a few. For two solid weeks he'd been subjected to professionally instructed flying and position lessons, and then had the rest of the holiday to perfect what he had worked on. In fact, Marcus Gethrings, Puddlemore's first string seeker, had taken a personal interest in working with Summerby. Since he would compete against Harry Potter, it was a goal of Gethrings to work Summerby as much as possible, so he might be able to secure a victory over the famous Boy-Who-Lived. If that happened, Puddlemore thought it might be able to draw in larger numbers to its training camp the following summer.

When the Ravenclaw vs. Hufflepuff game finally arrived, it was not a disappointment. Although perhaps not as well played or exciting as the season opener of Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, it still provided to be more of a match than the normal Hufflepuff shut-out.

Shelby Fitzpatrick, the Hufflepuff announcer, also got more spirited with his commentary, which made the game more enjoyable. Perhaps it was because he had first game jitters last time announcing, or he'd gotten some advice sent by a rumored Lee Jordan sent letter. Harry thought it was because it was his own house playing, but whatever the reason, it worked. The running commentary wasn't as dry or factual as before, while still not being as colored as Lee's had been, to make frequent interruptions from Professor McGonagall necessary.

In the end the chasers had been about of equal skill, but Ravenclaw had a varsity advantage in the beaters and seeker positions. They also targeted team captain Zacharias Smith, whose pompous attitude and short fuse had been discovered last year. After making him drop the quaffle for the fourth time in less than an hour (he insisted on leading all the Hufflepuff chaser plays), he lost some focus and confidence, just like he had when dueling against Professor Rofordit

that first time in DADA. After that, Ravenclaw quickly crawled ahead in the point department, and after only one hour and seventeen minutes, Cho managed to slightly beat out the Hufflepuff seeker to the snitch, for an end score of 230-60 to Ravenclaw.

The week after the Quidditch match, Harry also spent some normally free time to help out Hagrid with his lessons about phoenixes. It had been weeks since they'd planned the lessons together during one of Harry's detentions for cursing Draco, but somehow the opportunity never had presented itself. Harry was either caught up in his Arithmancy formulas, potions he was brewing, or personal study, to take the time out to devote an entire week to CoMC classes he wasn't even scheduled for. Likewise, Hagrid found it more difficult to work around his previously set lesson plans, because he had already scheduled the entire semester's worth of animals and supplies to be delivered on specific dates. Most of the subjects Hogwarts' students studied in his classes he found himself either on the school grounds, or in the Forbidden Forest. But there were others, especially for the upper years, that had to be borrowed from magical zoos from across Europe, or required special permits from the Ministry of Magic. It wasn't easy to just insert a whole week into such a tight schedule.

Finally though, Harry mentioned all this to Hagrid one day while sharing a cup of tea during a free period they both had (Harry was using the time to recover from his daily Cruciatus training.) Both though it was better to just get it out of the way rather than postponing it further. If that happened, neither thought the lesson would ever be taught. So while it required some sacrifice (Harry had to rearrange his schedule that week, and Hagrid had to return a crate full of Nifters to the Forest), both were willing for the rare opportunity to study not one, but two different kinds of phoenixes.

Hedwig and Fawkes both loved the opportunity to spend virtually the entire week in the open air. Fawkes was much too often kept cooped up in the Headmaster's office, and while Hedwig was allowed more freedom than that, she rarely got so much attention paid to her, which she thoroughly enjoyed.

The third and fourth year classes were more mesmerized than anything by the two phoenixes, and didn't have many questions to

ask. The just listen to both Harry and Hagrid tell a little about the creatures, dutifully took notes, and asked to pet the birds at the end of their classes.

The fifth year students were a little more adventurous; especially the Gryffindors. Because Hedwig was a normal fixture in their common room, most were already familiar with her, and took pride when Hedwig automatically flew over to some of their shoulders to say hello. Ginny got the longest greeting, but that only made sense with the amount of time she spent with both Harry and Hedwig.

The seventh year class wasn't as interested as they'd normally be in the phoenixes, due to their upcoming NEWTS. 'They must really be harder than the OWLs,' Harry thought, 'if they're all stressing over the exams this early in the school year. With my OWLs, I didn't start to review until March or so.'

And indeed, that was the case. Just like the younger years, they listened attentively with open ears to both Harry and Hagrid teach what by now each of them could recite from memory. They took notes, asked a few intelligent questions, and then sat down under a tree to do some individual work. A smart Ravenclaw asked if phoenixes were normal NEWT material, and the answer was no, because they weren't often available to study. With the guarantee that phoenix physiology or abilities wouldn't be on their exams, not many students choose to come closer to inspect the birds, or ask more personal questions like the other years had.

The sixth year class however, was unlike the others due to the fact of one single person; Draco Malfoy. Much to Hagrid's distaste, like Harry not many students choose to continue with NEWT level CoMC. In fact, only Ron, Lavendar, Dean, and Neville were there from Gryffindor, Hufflepuff had only about six students, and Ravenclaw only three. Slytherin however, perhaps because they viewed CoMC as an "easy" class, because of their disrespect for Hagrid, or the fact that Harry and Hermione weren't around to constantly show them up, were enrolled in large numbers. Harry didn't know how Hagrid managed to get through a lesson with Draco (flocked by Goyle, Crabbe, Pansy, Millicent, and Nott) constantly mocking him and being disruptive, but his opinion for the half giant's patience went up a few

notches. Harry didn't know how Ron managed to make it through class either without earning himself at least a detention a week. No doubt, Hagrid helped him out there.

From the moment the Slytherins showed up, with smirks on their faces all around, Harry knew there would be trouble. Only Blaise separated herself from her housemates, which Harry knew thanks to talking with the shy girl during D.A. lessons, she did normally and instead went to stand with the Ravenclaws. Hagrid was busy filleting some fish for their lesson behind his hut, and Harry was expected to greet everyone and begin the lecture. Ron gave him a friendly smile (it was nice to see Ron in a class other than DADA), Lavender gave him a giggle, so Harry took a deep breath and began.

"Gather around now, all of you. Today's lesson on Streelers is being postponed for a week, while Hagrid and I talk some about phoenixes. Just so you know, this isn't NEWT level material, and won't be on your exams next year, so don't feel you have to take world class notes. Instead Hagrid and Professor Dumbledore thought it might be a good idea for you all to be exposed to our resident phoenixes. It isn't often that a wizard or witch will get the chance to meet one, let alone see two from more than a distance. I have no idea why Professor Dumbledore hasn't done this before with Fawkes, seeing as he's always been around, but the day I start figuring him out is the day I commit myself."

Harry's small joke about Dumbledore's strange behavior earned a small laugh from the group of gathered students. Draco sneered and made a crack about "knowing Potter was crazy," but since it was quiet and wasn't much of an unexpected comment from him, Harry let it slide.

"I myself met Fawkes my second year here," Harry took a pause to walk over to Fawkes' perch, and stroke his breast feathers softly. "If it weren't for him, I've no doubt the school would have been closed, the Chamber of Secrets would have remained open, and I would have died from Basilisk poison. I'm sure you've all heard the stories, though what you've heard is no doubt more fiction than fact. However, I've known Hedwig here longer," Harry walked over to his own made perch, "so I'll mainly be concentrating talking about her in this lesson.

I'll point out any differences between the two when they apply, but for the most part, they have the same magical abilities."

"What makes you such an expert, Potter? You're not even in this class. In fact, I hear you're not in many classes at all this year. Got kicked out of Potions, and I heard you're taking fifth year classes as well. What's wrong? Had to repeat a year because you're too thick to take classes with the rest of us?"

Harry didn't bat an eye at Draco's comment, but inside he was seething. In his interrogation with Avery weeks before, Harry learned it was a letter sent from Draco to Lucius the day of the Hogsmeade visit, that had tipped off Voldemort that Harry knew the prophecy's contents. In retrospect, Harry could have smacked himself for talking with his friends about such matters in public. He should have learned his lesson about that the previous year in the Hog's Head when they were overheard. Since that knowledge was the one thing keeping Voldemort from public attacks, Harry had almost attacked Draco the next day in return. He managed to calm himself in time however, and swore he wouldn't ever forget Draco's part in the Diagon Alley and Azkaban attacks.

With his latest comment, Harry was again about to rip into Draco. To the outside observer it merely looked as if Harry hadn't heard or had brushed off the slur, but it wasn't true. Only his foreknowledge that Draco would try to push his buttons had ensured Harry was calm enough to continue. Harry had earlier pleaded with Hagrid to be present the first part of class, but Hagrid insisted that Harry could take care of them himself, seeing as how the class was his own year mates.

"For your information Draco," Harry replied instead of punching the boy's face, "like so much of the BS you spout off, that's not true. We all here know what really happened in Potions, and that I removed myself from class, instead of being kicked out. If you think differently, why don't you ask Snape how his backside is feeling since I knocked him on his arse. And yes I am taking one fifth year class, but that's only because it's a new subject for me, and I have to pass the OWLs before I'm allowed to continue. Just the fact that I did three years of school work this past summer to get caught up enough to enter, plus

the fact that Professor Vector said I'm advanced enough to join the seventh years, should show that it's not because I'm thick that I'm in that class, but just the opposite. If anyone's thick here, it's you Draco! I don't see you anywhere in NEWT level Defense classes. I've also seen you work in Charms and Transfiguration, and it leaves much to be desired. And let's just say that I've seen your actual marks for Care of Magical Creatures this last week, and I'm almost embarrassed for you. So unless you'd like for me to continue, I suggest you keep your smart comments to yourself, so we can proceed with the lesson."

Ron and Neville were outright laughing, and most of the other students, including Blaise, had a smile on their face. Draco's pale complexion had turned splotchy with anger, but faced with the facts, there wasn't much he could say in his defense. When it was apparent he wouldn't talk back, Harry picked back up with Hedwig as if he never left off.

Over the next half hour, Harry went over all the magical properties of phoenixes in general, and described a bit about their preferred climate, diets, and behaviors. Hedwig flew around to a few of the students she was either familiar with or deemed "safe," while Fawkes was perfectly happy just remaining where he was, and let a few students approach him. Hagrid eventually joined them to offer the fish and a few pears and berries to the class, so they could feed the birds. Fish and fruit were the phoenixes main diet Hagrid explained, although if they needed to they could survive on nuts, seeds, and even certain types of leaves.

Over half the class took the offered food, and even Crabbe and Goyle took a few filets and threw them to Fawkes. They didn't want to get close enough to hand feed him, nor did Harry think Fawkes would let them, but the thrown food was suitable for both parties.

After the feeding, Hagrid went over the white phoenix tales much of the class had been brought up to believe as bedtime stories, and offered a few major ideas about how they came to be. Harry didn't know many of the tales except what Dumbledore had told him, so Hagrid had much more experience with this part of the lesson. Harry actually turned his attention away from the class, and listened as well.

Until that week, he didn't know just how much the stories about white phoenixes really were popular. Even now, the last class of the week, Harry was learning something new. Hagrid managed to not repeat a single tale in the eight classes they had had that week, and he assured Harry there were plenty more that he didn't know.

The students knew a few tales of their own, and discussed them amongst themselves while they were given time to sketch the phoenixes on some spare parchment. After that, Harry concluded the lesson with the theory that Dumbledore had told him about how white phoenixes came to exist through strong accidental magic. It was the first any of the class had heard about that, and for the most part most of them believed it. Except for one, of course.

"What do you mean? Do you expect us to believe that that white phoenix is the ugly old snowy owl you used to have? Nonsense! Why don't you try another tall tale Potter? And I expect if Longbottom's warty toad were to get a kiss, he'd turn into a prince?" A few Slytherins laughed, but it was more forced than anything. Pitiful, really.

"I can assure you Trevor's already more of a prince than you'll ever be, Draco. And yes, Hedwig here used to be a snowy owl, although she was never ugly. I've had her since my first year. She was a birthday present from Hagrid, actually. So it's only fitting that she's here now." Hedwig, who had taken offence to being called ugly, calmed down some at Harry's soothing voice. "Why else do you think she has the same name?"

It was widely known in Gryffindor that Hedwig used to be Harry's owl, but the subject hadn't come up in any of Hagrid's other classes. Harry had just assumed that word had gotten around, and everybody had known.

"Really Harry?" Ernie McMillian asked. "We asked Professor Flitwick that question after Hedwig first appeared during your press conference. He wasn't sure, but he just figured that your old owl had died, and then when this phoenix showed up, you named her in memory of your old pet. I think that's the main story that's been spread around school."

Harry was momentarily stunned, but guessed that it was possible. After all, Professor Flitwick wasn't in the Order of the Phoenix, and therefore wasn't as close with Professor Dumbledore as some other staff members were. So when Hagrid, Remus, and McGonagall learned the truth about Harry's summer activities, and his new phoenix, the tiny man might have not learned the same.

"I hadn't heard that Ernie. Everybody in Gryffindor's always known, so I guessed word had gotten around. Well, you know the truth now. Hedwig used to be an ordinary post owl, until she got shot with a Reductor curse." Hedwig nipped Harry's ear at being called ordinary, but let him continue.

"It blew a hole straight through her wing, and damaged most of her back as well. I was very upset at the time, and although I didn't learn it until almost two months later, I guess I performed accidental magic to save her. I had thought she died, but instead of getting cold like dead bodies normally do, she got warmer and warmer. Eventually I had to back away because of the heat, and Hedwig started to smoke. Soon I could hear phoenix song, flames broke out, and not even water could douse them. She nearly burnt the entire room down, but when it was all over, Hedwig was as she appears now, only a little smaller. She's grown some since, and so far has had one burning day. I still don't know if her cycle will be any different than Fawkes'. Professor Dumbledore says Fawkes burns about four to six times a year, unless he's hurt."

"How so?" A Hufflepuff asked. Harry had already gone through a description of burning days, but must have left out the fact that if they took a spell or any type of physical damage, phoenixes entered them much sooner; sometimes immediately. So Harry went over anything he forgot, and the question got answered.

"There's also one more thing special about Hedwig. Originally being a post owl gives her a special ability that other phoenixes don't have. She can still deliver a letter to anyone in the world, thanks to her homing ability. And now that she can fly faster and flash teleport, she can deliver most letters almost immediately, and others within a matter of minutes. Just earlier this week, I had Hedwig deliver a letter to South America, and she returned from her trip in under an hour.

For a normal post owl, that would take anywhere from two to six weeks, depending on their size."

"What was she doing in South America?" Ron asked. Harry hadn't told any of his friends about that, and Harry could already tell Ron was starting to feel left out again.

"Sorry Ron, it's a surprise. You'll find out eventually though."

"So you're saying Potter, that this ruddy bird can deliver a letter to anyone in the U.K. in mere moments?" That question came from Draco, who instead of looking at Harry, was instead scribbling on a piece of parchment. Harry had a bad feeling about what was coming, and looked over to Hagrid to intervene. Hagrid however didn't interpret Harry's look, and didn't catch on.

"Prove it then, Potter. Here's a letter I just wrote. Let's see you bird deliver it. We'll wait until she's back. If it doesn't take long like you claim, then there's no harm done." Without waiting for permission, Draco pushed his way forward to Hedwig's perch, and roughly shoved the letter in her talons. Harry had too many students between him and them, so couldn't stop Draco in time. Hedwig however was more than capable of taking care of herself. Tossing Draco's note aside, she instead launched from her perch and began to terrorize Draco from the sky. Everyone had a good laugh as Draco kept diving to the ground to avoid her razor sharp talons, and by the time Harry finally got close, it was obvious that Hedwig wouldn't be delivering any of Draco's mail.

"Potter, call your ruddy bird off! It's attacking me!"

"I guess you shouldn't have assumed that you'd be allowed to use her like an ordinary school owl then, should you? You know what they say happens when you assume?" Harry was having a good laugh himself, but was getting nervous that Hedwig might actually clip Draco with her claws. The last thing he needed was a repeat of the Buckbeak incident. Not that Lucius Malfoy had anywhere enough power anymore to try to get Hedwig punished, and it was impossible to execute a phoenix, but Harry figured it best to avoid the possibility.

"Hedwig, come here girl! Leave the snarky git alone." At her master's call, Hedwig alighted on Harry's shoulder, but still cast a few glares at Draco, who was only then standing up from the ground.

"That's it Potter! I'm informing Professor Snape that your bird is a menace. It should have its wings clipped, is what I think! A proper Headmaster would never have allowed you and that oaf to teach a class with your vultures."

Hagrid frowned at the "oaf" crack, and most of the Gryffindors (with Ron in the front) started to push up their sleeves and draw their wands. That was nothing compared to how angry Harry was, however. All lesson long he'd been barely tolerable of Malfoy and his snide remarks. This latest insult, in addition to his existing anger for Draco's part in the Diagon Alley attack, was the last straw.

"Shut up Malfoy! You just don't know when to shut up and cool down, do you?" Turning his attention to Hedwig, he added, "Why don't you help him cool down, girl? I'm sure he'd like to see your strength. After all, he doesn't believe in your abilities, now does he?"

Harry supposed he should have let Hagrid deal with the situation, but Harry wasn't thinking straight. Hagrid never stood up to Draco like he should, and it was Hedwig who was insulted as much as Hagrid, so Harry felt justified.

Hedwig seemed to know just what Harry was thinking too, for not a second after his request, she launched off of Harry's shoulder, and once again started to dive-bomb Draco. This time though, instead of pulling up at the last moment, she dug her talons into his shoulder, and picked the blond up screaming and flailing. The lake wasn't too far away from Hagrid's hut, and not a minute later, Draco was definitely cooler than he'd been before. Hedwig had dropped him in the center of the lake from fifty feet in the air, and so close to the end of autumn, the water's temperature must have been quite chilly.

They all had a good laugh (even Hagrid!) as Draco had to spend the next ten minutes swimming to shore. What made it better though, was that he couldn't manage more than a dog paddle, and even his cronies were laughing at him. The class enjoyed the last few minutes

of their lesson without Draco's sour attitude and interruptions, and left with grins on their face. Harry and Hagrid congratulated each other on a week well spent; for the most part; and went to clean up. Just as Draco was returning to collect his things, Harry bent over to pick up the note that had been tossed aside earlier.

"Give that back, Potter! It's personal." Harry didn't notice Draco finally make it to shore, but he almost broke out in laughter again at the sight. The Slytherin's perfect robes and hair were a mess, he was obviously freezing, and to top off the look, he had a tear in the seat of his pants where Harry suspected a Grindylow had taken a bite out of him. 'Must not have been agreeable to the Grindylow,' thought Harry.

"I don't see how, Draco. You felt it a public enough letter to send during a class demonstration. That's assuming it's even the same piece of parchment. It could be someone's notes left behind. And you know how much I hate to assume, don't you? You can have it back once I see what's on it, to make sure it's really yours." Harry didn't know why he was being so childish about the note, but for some reason he wanted to know who it was to, and what was on it. Chalk it up to simple curiosity perhaps, but Harry didn't feel like giving in to Malfoy at the moment. And after his behavior and attitude, Harry felt he had the right.

Malfoy however didn't. When Harry refused to return the letter, Draco's hand dove in his robe pocket. For a moment a feared played out across his face (he though he lost his wand on the swim back to shore), but it quickly vanished as he found it, and pointed it at Harry. Harry had already unholstered his own as well.

"What's going on here now? Harry? I think the lesson's over for today, and you both ought to get cleaned up and dried off before dinner. Put those wands away!"

"Potter's got something of mine, and I want it back!" Draco demanded. He made no motion to put his wand away, and in fact took a few steps closer to Harry.

Harry on the other hand, in the presence of a professor, sheathed his wand, and turned his attention away from Draco. "I told Draco I

wasn't sure this is his. I was about to open the paper and check, when Draco pulled his wand. I still think it might be Neville's notes. I thought I saw him drop them on the way back to the castle."

Hagrid must have known that Harry was lying, because he saw the note Draco wrote as well, but he was probably curious as well. So when he asked Harry to hand over the letter, Draco protested loudly.

"Calm down Malfoy, you great wuss! I'll take a quick look, and if it's your letter, then you can have it back. Harry won't see your girly handwriting, so there's no need to get all upset."

Apparently, that wasn't enough of a promise for Draco, and he chose to attack. With his wand still out, he shot a stunner at Harry, who without a wand or warning, wasn't able to dodge it. He didn't have his watch's shield charm up either, but luckily his dragon hide vest took the brunt of the spell. Harry swooned dangerously, but was able to shake the cobwebs from his head before completely falling over. He didn't know what happened in those few seconds, but when he turned his attention back to Malfoy (this time with his wand in hand), Malfoy was sitting on the ground, holding his hand in pain. It seemed that Hagrid had been outraged that Draco had attacked an unarmed student, in his presence no less, and had felt the need to disarm him himself. Not being able to use magic however, Hagrid did it the old fashion way by grabbing Draco around the arm, and prying the wand from his grasp. Matched against his giant strength, Draco had no chance, and Harry was forced to sheath his wand again in disappointment. He was really looking for an excuse to curse Draco now!

Harry also must have missed Hagrid reading the letter, for it was unfolded, and currently being waved menacingly in the air as Hagrid yelled for Draco to return to the dungeons. Whatever was on the parchment must not have been good, because Hagrid took twenty points off of Slytherin (something he rarely did), and was promising to let Dumbledore know all about the incident. Harry was content to watch as Draco made a few more pleas and threats, before finally sulking off to the castle, shivering cold, without his wand.

"What did I miss?" Harry asked Hagrid when it was all over. There was only about an hour left until dinner, and Harry had planned to get in some more reading, but thought finding out what happened was more important.

"Harry, I don't know if you should read this or not, but I expect it's your right. Twas' indeed his letter you picked up there, only the letter wasn't as innocent as he claimed it. Here, take a look."

Harry took the offered letter from Hagrid, not really knowing what to expect, but clearly not expecting what the letter actually contain. If he was angry before, he was furious now!

Dear Father,

Our idiot Headmaster has deemed it interesting enough for our normal lessons to be interrupted, so that Potter and my oaf of a CoMC professor can spend a whole lesson teaching the class about phoenixes. The material's not even on our exams, and most of what was said sounds like fairy tales to me, but I did pick up something interesting. Potter claims this white phoenix used to be his old owl, that got transformed somehow by accidental magic when the beast got shot with a Reductor curse. Potter claims that in addition to normal phoenix abilities, it also kept the ability to find any person by post, just like regular owls. If this is true, I thought it might be an advantage you could either use, or at the least one Potter shouldn't have. So I'm about to demand that Potter demonstrate, and I'm going to attach this note to the bird's leg, to deliver to you. If it works, and you get this, do what you will. Keep the bird for yourself, or kill it if you wish. Either way, its one more thing I can do to harm Potter, so I'm happy. Give my regards to Mother, and I'll write my normal letter at week's end.

Draco

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It was never made officially public what happened to Draco because of the letter, but Hagrid informed Harry personally that Draco was

docked fifty house points, and made to serve three detentions with Mr. Flich. Hagrid had pushed for the removal of Draco's prefect status, but the request was laughed at by Professor Snape, who claimed the incident not more than a childish prank, and thought the punishment too severe as it was. And because Snape was Draco's Head of House, Dumbledore deferred judgment to him, and Draco got off lightly.

Harry let all his friends know about the letter of course, and therefore within a week most of the school knew. Even most of the Slytherins were disgusted by Draco's actions, and his popularity and influence lessened even more within the house. Snape tried accusing Harry of leaking the secret, but Harry truthfully denied having told anyone but his closest friends. Since he'd never been told not to, there was nothing Harry could be punished for, and Snape had to settle for directing his normal sneers at the Gryffindor table during meals.

Hermione was sorry to have missed all the action as she didn't take Hagrid's class, but enjoyed the many retellings of it Ron gave the younger years almost nightly in the common room for an entire week. Another week passed, and suddenly it was closer to December than October. It was less than a month from the next Hogsmeade trip, the next Quidditch match, and the holidays were just around the corner.

Around this time too, Hermione finally decided that she'd volunteer when Professor Rofordit asked to duel a student in class for house points. Only herself, Harry, and two others hadn't made the attempt yet, and Harry knew that Hermione had been thinking about doing so soon. She had planned to use a lot of transfiguration in the duel, and had asked for Harry's advice. He just suggested that she play to her strengths, and keep things as simple as possible. While it might be impressive to animate or conjure many objects in the duel, doing so would require too much concentration, which would give Rofordit a chance to easily defeat Hermione. Instead, Harry suggested that she not transfigure more than one or two objects as once, so she could still stay defensive enough to dodge and block spells, and perhaps even fire some off some of her own.

The duel took place a Thursday morning the third week in November, and to give her credit, Hermione had come the closest to beating their old professor, although in the end she hadn't.

Just like Zacharias Smith and all the others she'd taken on so far, once the duel started, Rofordit didn't make a single offensive move. Instead she just waited calmly for Hermione to act, and then moved to deflect any attacks. And like Harry had taught in the D.A., Hermione chose a few well-placed spells to gauge all of Rofordit's power, speed, and skill. Because of her advanced age, the woman choose to block or deflect most spells instead of dodging them, and that's what Hermione thought she could take advantage of; Rofordit's lack of movement. Her plan was to transfigure and animate a few student desks into Labradors, and have them chase the lady around. Hopefully while Rofordit was busy fending off the large distractions, Hermione would be able to slip a few spells in that would get past the professor's defense.

The Labradors were made successfully, even if they weren't perfect. It was much like the spell Cedric had used against his dragon years ago, and was mainly used to distract. But because Rofordit was much smarter than a dragon was, Hermione had to make sure the dogs were more menacing than normal. So she gave them all overly large mouths and teeth, which she hoped would give the teacher a cause for concern. That way, Rofordit couldn't simply ignore the dogs, for fear of being bitten.

Unfortunately, Hermione had to transfigure and animate each dog individually. So by the time she got all three done, Rofordit had seen what she intended. During the last dog's mouth's modification, Rofordit tried to catch Hermione unaware by launching a bludgeoning spell. It was the first time she made a direct attack at one of her adversaries, so just because of that Harry later congratulated Hermione.

Hermione had no problem noticing the attack, and paused in her work with the dog to summon a chair from against the wall. The chair intercepted Rofordit's spell, and then Hermione went back to her work. Rofordit offered up a rare smile, and made no further attacks until Hermione was done.

Once the dogs were complete, it was Hermione's turn to sit back and do nothing, while gauging her opposition. She set the dogs loose, and conjured a bone that she physically tossed over to Rofordit's position. That got the dogs away from her, and over to the other side of the room.

Rofordit just smiled, and backed away from the bone, which didn't last long. The dogs did come after her a few times, but when that happen, she just gave them a small jolt with her wand tip, and they yipped and lost interest. Hermione had also been trying to launch a variety of spells, including her much favored bean bag hex, but so far hadn't much success. She so far managed a glancing blow to Rofordit's legs, but it didn't do any lasting damage. Her dogs weren't as successful as she would have liked, and she was also busy defending herself. Between prodding the dogs with small jolts of electrical current, Rofordit tossed a few spells Hermione's way. Most were stunners, disarming hexes, and light jinxes, but it was enough to not let Hermione gain the upper hand.

After another five minutes of fruitlessness on Hermione's part, Rofordit decided to end things. With a quick wave of her wand she conjured five cat statues made of marble, and another wand wave later, they were animated. The dogs immediately went after the cats, leaving Rofordit free to concentrate her attention on Hermione. Hermione had to take a complete defensive stance after that, and hadn't got in another offensive spell. She lasted almost two minutes blocking and dodging, before one of Rofordit's hexes passed through her shield. The unidentified spell caused Hermione to go cross eyed, and Rofordit ended things a moment later by taking her wand with a disarming hex.

When the hexes were lifted and the class's desks returned to normal, Rofordit asked the class to critique the duel as she always did. A lot of people had a lot of nice things to say about Hermione's skills with transfiguration, and suggested that if she were able to have animated more dogs, she might have gained an advantage earlier on.

"I disagree," Harry spoke up for the first time. "I think the dog idea was promising, but any more than the three she used would have

taken up too much concentration to direct. Each one requires a small amount of direction while being animated, which Hermione couldn't afford to loose more of, or else you would have caught her with a spell early on. Too many more dogs, and she wouldn't have managed nearly as well. It was also apparent that the dogs didn't come as a surprise, as you had nearly as much time to prepare for them, while she animated them one by one. And then once you conjured the cats to distracts the dogs, Hermione should have vanished them altogether, as by then they clearly weren't working as intended. The cats wouldn't have harmed her at all, and in fact they were draining you of some concentration. Hermione might have been more able to attack then, rather than to just defend."

A few students argued and agreed with Harry's observations, and Rofordit let them talk awhile before she spoke.

"I happen to agree with Mr. Potter. He obviously knows something about animating objects, and the toll they take on one's concentration." Hermione pouted a little when she said that, but peaked up a second later when Rofordit further went on to say, "Ms. Granger's plan of attack was a sound one, however. It was well researched, planned out, and resourceful. I only suggest that she should have practiced her animation a bit more before attempting. It is possible to animate three objects at once, although extremely difficult, and that was a major flaw in her plan. Still, not many witches and wizards are highly skilled in Transfiguration, and I think that a majority of opponents would have successfully fallen for the distraction that the dogs provided. Only because my own skill in Transfiguration matches or exceeds Ms. Granger's, did the attempt not work. I daresay your average Death Eater won't be as knowledgeable. Very well done Ms. Granger, and I award Gryffindor ten points for your originality and forethought. I'll be sure to let Professor McGonagall know of your achievement."

Even though she hadn't won, Hermione was more than pleased with the loss and ten points, as it was still ten points more than any other loser had received.

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As another week passed, and Harry continued his extra reading and training, he also made sure to make plenty of time with his friends. It was something he hadn't done the first few weeks of school, and he occasionally slipped back into the bad habit from time to time. Since the first Hogsmeade weekend, all his friends knew he was spending every free moment preparing, so they understood when Harry wasn't around. When he was though, they made sure to enjoy the time thoroughly.

Ron suggested that they take an hour out of every Saturday afternoon to visit Hagrid, after feeling guilty about forgetting about their first meeting. Harry and Hermione quickly agreed, and with the exception of having to consistently refusing his rock cakes, all had a wonderful time. Sometimes Ginny, Luna, and Neville joined them as well, but not always. Harry was still much closer to Ron and Hermione in a special way, and it was silently understood that they'd still do some things on their own; as the original "trio."

Speaking of guilt, Harry made sure to spend time with Remus as well. Although he hadn't thought anything of it at the time, weeks ago when he conned Remus into accompanying him to Gringotts, Harry later realized that he had taken advantage of Remus' trust in him by not mentioning going against Dumbledore's wishes. Harry knew how he would have felt if it had happened to him, so after apologizing profusely, Harry usually tried to spend at least one or two of his free periods a week talking with Remus in his office.

Sometimes they talked about James and Sirius as the Marauders, but mostly they just kept each other company while each read or wrote. Remus got to see some of Harry's collection of books (which he was very impressed with), and although he never managed to get outright permission to visit the Restricted Section itself, sometimes Harry was rewarded by being allowed to read a book from there that Remus had checked out himself for the day.

Remus had heard about Harry's threat to Dumbledore to sell Grimmauld Place over the winter holidays, and although he thought it was a bit drastic just to prove a point, he at least assured Harry that Sirius wouldn't have been happier to get rid of the place, which had

been a hell in his childhood, and a prison in his last months alive. Frankly, Harry hadn't thought much more about the threat until Remus mentioned it, and Harry had no idea if it were even possible to sell. It was a muggle home, with wizarding enchantments, in a muggle neighborhood, so it posed some unique problems no matter what Harry decided to do with it. Most wizards likely wouldn't want to purchase a brownstone in a seedy part of London, and the home would have to undergo some major renovations before it would be suitable to be sold to muggles. Not to mention all the security spells and wards in place, not the least of which was the Fidelius held by Dumbledore.

It was actually Remus who suggested a possible solution to Harry. Although he still thought Harry should hold onto the house, and talk his problems with Dumbledore through instead of taking drastic actions, Remus let Harry know about a few catalogues that could be found in the library. Commonly referred to as "Squib Services," the catalogues listed the many business and services offered to the magical community, which breached both the wizard and muggle worlds. Not having any other options, many squibs learned their ways around muggles, and over the years had learned to seize unique opportunities. Getting a squib real estate agent, who worked in the muggle field, but was knowledgeable of the magical world, turned out to be the perfect solution. Harry found a whole list of agents who were capable of subcontracting any work needed to wizards, to make homes muggle-ready for a new market. The process also worked in reverse of course (turning muggle homes into magical ones), but Harry had no need of that.

Since the catalogues were rarely checked out, were updated frequently, and enough copies existed, Madame Pince let Harry have a copy on permanent loan. As long as he returned it before he left for summer break, he could keep a copy to himself. Selling the house wasn't a priority right then, and there was still the issue of Dumbledore's Fidelius charm to work out (he couldn't list the house if people couldn't find it), but Harry vowed that he'd look into the matter later.

Remus also kept Harry informed with what the Order and Ministry were up to, which Harry greatly appreciated. Minister Bones so far

had done a wonderful job, as had the three Under-Ministers beneath her. Each was in charge of a different aspect of the Ministry, and were doing all they could to flush out any corrupt or inept politicians, and to reverse nearly ten years of Fudge's damages.

Minister Bones herself was swamped in legal documents and decrees, trying to sort out all of the outdated, immoral, or contradictory laws that needed to be overturned. Many were passed in Fudge's final months in office, but many more went back further. Remus was happy to announce that some of the werewolf regulatory laws were revoked or lessened, and that perhaps for the first time ever, he'd be able to hold down a steady income outside of Hogwarts.

And as if that wasn't enough, as former head of the Magical Law Enforcement Office, Minister Bones set up a modified auror training program as well. Compared to the old program, the new one was lessened in duration from three to two years, was less geared towards peace-time situations, and was given greater funding and support. Within her first month in office, over fifty recruits entered the program, which was twice the number of aurors who'd been trained in the last five years together.

Mr. Weasley's responsibility as new Under-Minister was to coordinate any public attacks with muggle officials. Sadly, not a lot of time passed after the Diagon Alley and Azkaban attacks before Death Eater and Dementor activity was spotted all throughout the countryside. The Dementors had more or less free reign, and attacked in packs of about twenty whenever they got hungry; about once a week. A few attacks were against wizarding households, but because they were at least capable of seeing the Dementors, and possibly of repelling them, the Dementors mainly stuck to attacking muggles. Almost fifty muggles a week lost their souls, and when found out, it was part of Mr. Weasley's responsibility to arrange their transfer to St. Mungo's, and explain the situation to the higher level muggle authorities. It frustrated them to no end that they had no defense against the Dementors, and it was a testament to Mr. Weasley that he managed to calm them and assure them that the wizarding law enforcement officers would do all they could in the upcoming months. It would take awhile before they had the numbers

trained to retaliate properly, and until then Mr. Weasley was responsible for keeping the muggles in check.

Amos Diggory, formerly of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, inherited the job of contacting as many sentient magical races as possible, to persuade them to either join their efforts against Voldemort, or at the least not join him. Like Hagrid's small trip to visit the giants the summer before, he arranged convoys of Ministry volunteers to travel throughout Europe, seeking out vampire dens, werewolf packs, giant and troll colonies, and the like. For the most part, their efforts were only mildly successful. With the new revoked restrictions against vampires and werewolves, they mostly agreed not to join in on either side of the upcoming turmoil. The giants and trolls largely ignored the convoys sent to them, but let it be known that they avoided all wizards who visited them lately. Diggory wasn't happy to learn that other wizards had been to visit some of the colonies (obviously Death Eaters), so he ordered the convoys to camp on the outskirts of the giants' land, to keep an eye out for Death Eater activity.

The third Under-Minster, Arnold Peacegood, former head Obliviator, was delegated the task of creating and distributing emergency portkeys to every wizard household and place of business in the country. It was a truly daunting task, but one which the Ministry was commended on, and one which he handled without complaint.

The portus spell was first taught to a bunch of junior Ministry workers who recently joined the Department of Magical Transportation. The training didn't last long, as they only had to make portkeys to one place; a newly constructed wing off the Auror Headquarters' building. The new wing was secure so that no one could enter or exit without first having to travel through a series of magically warded checkpoints. And when any person arrived in the new wing, spells would immediately inform aurors on duty of new arrivals. The plan was, once the portkeys were distributed, any families or workplaces that were attacked by Death Eaters or Dementors could portkey out to the new "safe house" at Ministry Headquarters. At the same time aurors would be alerted, who after a quick consultation with the new arrivals, could decide whether to risk apparating to the scene of the crime, or waiting for larger reinforcements in case of a massive scale attack.

The only flaw in the plan was that Death Eaters could possibly portkey in to the new wing and attack from within, so that took some time setting up. After a consultation with Albus Dumbledore however, he suggested that a modified dark arts detection spell be incorporated with every portkey. It wouldn't be public knowledge that those bearing the Dark Mark couldn't use the portkeys, and therefore couldn't invade the Ministry.

Remus only told Harry about the modified dark art detection spell because Dumbledore admitted to him in confidence that it was Harry and his watch that gave him the idea. It was the same spell and defense Harry had earlier in the year used on Snape's Dark Mark; only modified. Harry was slightly proud that the Headmaster saw one of his ideas useful enough for such an important task, although he was slightly hurt he wasn't told or asked personally by Dumbledore himself.

In addition to setting up the new wards and portkeys, Peacegood was also able to put his Obliviator skills to use, covertly. No one except top level Ministry personnel, Dumbledore and the Order, and now Harry knew, but Minster Bones had ordered Peacegood to randomly stun, interrogate with Veritaserum, and then obliviate Ministry workers. It was a drastic way to flush out any Voldemort supporters, but one that Bones felt was necessary. Too many new security measures were being taken only to be reported on or sabotaged by Voldemort collaborators. Remus said that by the end of the year, the entire Ministry would be interrogated and obliterated, thanks to Peacegood.

Although Harry was surprised that Dumbledore felt comfortable letting Harry know so much of what was going on, he was thankful. It also made him wonder what else was happening behind closed doors that even Remus didn't know of, and that pleased him even more. Harry hoped the new Minister was wise enough to start constructing a new prison, to house all these collaborators. Not only that, but once a secure location was available, Harry knew he could get rid of his house guests. He only kept the captured Death Eaters because he knew if they were put back in Azkaban, it would be only a matter of time before they'd escape again.

Some of the names Harry got from his interrogations, about Death Eaters and supporters in the Ministry, Harry was now confident that the new tactics would find. Harry passed what names he had onto Remus (although he wouldn't say where he got them), who passed the names onto Peacegood to interrogate. It would only be a matter of time until they were all flushed out and arrested.

The few other names Harry was given, along with the other well known Death Eaters, Harry made a list of. He couldn't use the secret tunnels anymore now that Dumbledore was watching them, but Harry could still portkey out to the forest, and then apparate to wherever he liked.

Four more Death Eaters joined the others in Harry's "prison" compartment the month of November, bringing the grand total up to ten. All his cells were now occupied, and he knew he'd have to create some more before the holidays like he originally planned.

The first new addition to his collection was another low ranking Death Eater, who only joined Voldemort's ranks earlier that summer. Like Sean Hazelton, he hadn't committed many crimes besides his initiation, but that was enough for Harry. And like Hazelton, he was easy to capture. Harry apparated to Diagon Alley, and took the muggle tube to his flat, which Harry had the address of. After an hour of surveillance to make sure he was alone and vulnerable, which Harry made good use of his x-ray lens, Harry simply knocked on the door and stunned the guy. As luck would have it, the Death Eater wasn't as disgusted with muggles as some of the others in his fold, and had been comfortable enough with them to order some curry take-out. Harry saw the man make the call with his lens, and used an Extendable Ear to overhear the conversation. A half hour later when the delivery guy arrived, Harry took the order, obliviated the man after paying him, and delivered the food himself. When the Death Eater opened the door, he found a man of nondescript height with the plastic bags of curry containers in one hand, and a wand in the other. The next thing he knew, he was woken up in a dark and dirty cell, without his wand, and with no explanation.

The second and third Death Eaters were a married couple named Parker; much like the Lestranges, only a bit younger. And just like the

Lestranges, they were both cruel and capable duelers, which put up a valiant fight. Luckily Harry caught them in different rooms of their house, and at different times. Not having to fight them together was a huge advantage, which Harry was more than happy to take. Again supplied with their address from an interrogation session, Harry traveled to their home one weekend, spent a good two hours surveiling it with his magical lens and Extendable Ears, and only acted when he was confident he could take them.

The husband came first, and after warding the room he was in against sound being heard from outside it, Harry blew out a window, jumped through, and started to attack. The man was sitting at a desk writing some correspondence when Harry attacked, and only Harry's initial spell which caused double-vision hit before he drew his wand to defend himself. The desk lent some cover at first until Harry blew it apart, and the man either didn't know the counter charm to the double-vision spell or didn't have time to cast it, so that was in Harry's favor too. After that though, the two traded blows for a full two minutes. Even seeing two Harrys, the man was able to put up a strong defense, while shooting out Cruciatus curses and cutting hexes in all directions. Harry had the benefit that he only had to block or dodge half the curses (the others were aimed five feet to his right, and was able to attack at multiple angles as far as the Death Eater was concerned. When the two minutes were over, the room was completely destroyed, Harry suffered from a sore hip where he took a bludgeoning spell and bleeding neck where a conjured noose had hung him before he'd been able to cut himself loose. His adversary however was much worse off. A cut cheek from a cutting spell, a badly burned hand from a fireball, a conjured dart sticking out of his shoulder, and a few bruises that were bound to show up were the signs the man showed at first glance. After stunning him, Harry spent a few minutes to make sure the wife was still in her bath upstairs, while he cast a few low level healing charms on his hip and neck.

Harry attacked the wife next, and although attacking a naked, defenseless woman in the middle of her bath seemed like a good idea at the time, Harry later changed his mind. As soon as he opened the door, the woman raised her wand, which Harry hadn't bothered to check for at the tub's side table ,and begun flinging curses. Harry dove to the ground, but in the small room, didn't have much space to

dodge or hide. Within seconds he was hit with the Cruciatus, a jolt of electricity, and a stunner to boot! Luckily this time Harry made sure to reactivate his shield spell between bouts, and the spell absorbed the stunner, which otherwise could have caused some real damage.

The real challenge came when Harry forced himself to break through the Cruciatus, which surprised the woman long enough for Harry to retreat out of the bathroom for cover. What he didn't expect though was a fully starkers Death Eater to not give him a moments rest, and instead come rushing at him with tits bouncing and wand waving. She must have been about thirty, and was more attractive than most her age as well. Her state of nakedness further distracted Harry, who again suffered two hits before he got his defenses up, and began attacking back. They were both now in a large bedroom, with Harry's back to the door, so the woman couldn't escape.

Shaking his mind clear of the provocative distraction before him (the seventh year girls he spied on didn't look that that!), Harry was able to fend off all her subsequent attacks, throw a few of his own, before catching her in a rough tackle. Harry felt odd using some of the more painful curses that came to mind on a naked woman, so in the end he resorted to physically restraining her. She had ducked behind the bed for cover from a binding spell Harry had shot, and when she came back up to peek over the edge, she'd only a split second to react as Harry dove straight for her. The time wasn't enough for her to get a spell off, and both tumbled to the floor in a jumbled heap, both grasping furtively for her wand. Harry had already reholstered his, and only because of his surprise tactics and his superior strength was he able to wrestle the woman's wand away from her, and able to stun her with it. It was more difficult than he thought though, with the woman being slippery from the water and soap of her bath. Harry earned a knee to the groin for his troubles, as well as a bitten ear and scratches all over his face, but when faced with other options, Harry was satisfied. Not many pains were worse to a man than a knee to the groin, but the Cruciatus was definitely one of them. Just one of the spells' layers was that same feeling all over the body, and Harry much preferred the real physical pain, to the magically induced one.

Harry had also had to grab some clothes from a drawer for the woman, seeing as how he couldn't keep her naked (even though a

little voice in his head said he could.) But in the end she woke up too naked and cold in a dank cell, with her clothes pilled on her thin mattress. Her husband was only a few feet away separated by a thin stone wall. But for all the good it did them, they might have well been in difference countries.

Jugson was the forth Death Eater that Harry caught in November; a member of Voldemort's inner circle. Ironic really, that he'd just escaped Azkaban the previous year, only to be caught by Harry at the Ministry months later and rejailed. Then, he'd escaped Azkaban again in late October, and had lasted a little more than three weeks before Harry came to visit.

This time when Harry arrived, Jugson wasn't alone, so Harry had to wait patiently while the man entertained his guests. Since Jugson was still a wanted man, Harry knew the people he was meeting with were guilty in some way, but he couldn't prove it. Though even if he could, it didn't matter. Harry wasn't nearly good enough to take on Jugson plus his four unknown guests. He had only come for the one man, and that was enough for him for now. If the guests were indeed other Death Eaters or Voldemort supporters, then their names would come up in Jugson's interrogation.

It also wasn't his house that he was staying at, obviously. That had been sold years ago when he was first arrested. This house was bought under an assumed identity by Lucius Malfoy, and had been sold again to Jugson just the summer before for a small markup in price. No one had used it while Jugson was back in Azkaban, which Harry found out was another advantage. Because he'd only lived in the house a few weeks before being caught at the Ministry, and had only been back a couple weeks before Harry visited, only the very basic wards and protection spells were in place. Harry got all the information from Avery weeks ago, and just bided his time until he could act.

It took over four hours before the guests finally left, but Harry didn't mind. He kept a vigilant watch as he mentally planned the next week's D.A. meetings. They'd been going very well so far, and Harry thought he might be able to promote another two or three members into the advanced group. Harry tabled the thoughts though, when

Jugson and his guests made their way to the entry gates of the small countryside manor. The apparition wards ended there, and like a good host, Jugson saw his visitors off his property when the time came. Once the group was far enough away from the front door, Harry slipped out of the bushes he'd been hiding in, opened the front door with a quick and quiet "Alohamora," and stepped inside.

Five minutes later when Jugson returned, Harry was ready waiting. Again, he managed to get off two spells before Jugson realized what was happening and found his own wand. A muting spell prevented him from speaking, and the fire set to his boots put a jump to his step that wasn't there previously. After that, it didn't take long for Harry to work the Death Eater over. He was one of the less intelligent Death Eaters that had been at the Ministry, and Harry had seen first hand (reviewed many times in his pensieve) the man's abilities and favorite spells. Add to that the inability to speak any incantations, his burning shoes, and the bottle of wine Harry had witnessed him drink with dinner, within three minutes Harry had the man bound, disarmed, and stunned.

Speaking of the Death Eaters, their missing status wasn't ignored for long. The same week of Hermione's duel with Rofordit, Harry had a vision of Voldemort addressing his Death Eaters in a not-too-happy mood. Apparently he'd finally noticed a significant portion of his followers weren't present, and had asked their whereabouts. Lucius, who was friendliest with Avery, Crabbe, and Goyle, was expected to answer, but could only plead ignorance. No one had seen them since the Diagon Alley attack, and only when Voldemort pointed out their absence did anyone find it odd. After a round of torture for Lucius and his brethren, the vision ended and Harry woke up to his painful scar, but with a smile on his face.

Two weeks later, after Harry had captured the Death Eater couple and Jugson, Harry suffered through another vision gladly to witness an even more distraught Lucius Malfoy. He'd been unable to track down Avery, Crabbe, Goyle, Jugson, the Parkers, and some of the new recruits that went missing. When Voldemort asked the reason for his failure, Harry could tell that Lucius was scrambling to answer, and could only guess.

"I'm sorry my Lord, but I do not know. My sources say that they haven't been taken into Ministry custody. My guess is that Dumbledore and his associates have captured them. Perhaps they're being held prisoner at Hogwarts, as Dumbledore knows that Azkaban is no longer secure." Harry had to laugh at just how close Lucius had come to guessing. Dumbledore had nothing to do with any of it, but everything else was almost spot on. It was proof of his sheer arrogance that Voldemort thought differently.

"CRUCIO!" A smile appeared on his snake-like face as the blond man flailed and screamed for some moments, before finally being released from the spell's grasp. "Lucius, you fool! The old fool would never endanger his precious students by holding a group of Death Eaters nearby. Besides, it's not his style. If he made any captures, he'd want the public to know about them, to show support for his light side. No, Dumbledore does not have them. It's also come to my attention that their accounts have all been emptied completely. Their families have been left with only their homes and the possessions within, but no other means of finance. That indicates that my faithful are showing cowardice instead, and perhaps trying to flee the country. I suspect that they've planned this for some time, and I wonder why you didn't know of this, Lucius. Avery, Crabbe and Goyle are your closest confidants, are they not? How could you have not known of their plans?"

Lucius was trembling with fear as he heard the question posed to him. He'd no idea that Avery and the others had made plans to escape! And now, it looked like he was going to suffer for his ignorance.

"No master, I knew of no plans as you've described them! Crabbe and Goyle's sons still attend Hogwarts, and my son's made no mention of their fathers' activities. I wonder if they're even aware? If Avery and the others truly have run away, then I promise to find them. Please my Lord, just give me time to look further."

Lucius of course was tortured some more, along with Nott, Mulciber, Macnair, and a few others who were unlucky enough to be present. In the end though Voldemort gave them some more time to track down the apparent deserters, but only with the threat of more punishment for failure.

When Harry woke up in a cold sweat, again with a slight smile, he couldn't help but count his good luck that Voldemort was so suspicious of people. It had never occurred to Harry to stage his abductions to look like the Death Eaters were leaving Voldemort's service. But with the emptying of the V vaults, and the complete vanishing of them, it certainly did look that way. The mess at the Parkers might have been suspicious, but either no one had checked to look at their home, or they had thought nothing of a little damage to a single room in the house.

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It was the last week in November that Harry once again felt some pressure, where it hadn't existed in the previous month. Teachers were starting to pile on work before the winter break, the Quidditch team stepped back up to four practices a week to prepare for their upcoming game against Hufflepuff, the whole school became excited at prospects of the next Hogsmeade weekend, and Harry had four new prisoners to interrogate, more cells to construct, and the upcoming holidays to worry about.

Harry had moved up two others to the advanced D.A. group, and to keep the numbers even, had to move down two of the advanced members to the beginner level. Harry made sure they understood it wasn't personal; he just had to make everything fair. As it turned out, both were fifth year students (one Ravenclaw and one Gryffindor), who admitted that their OWL revisions were starting to get to them, and didn't blame Harry in the least. It took some adjusting to get them to participate fully in the beginning D.A. sessions again, but it wasn't too bad.

What made it worse however, was the incident that happen the first day in December, at a beginner's D.A. meeting. Harry was helping them perfect two new spells (*Impedimenta* and *Quiesco*; a sleeping spell), and was praising the members on their work. He took special pride in the Slytherin first years; the same ones he'd helped show around school the first day back. Rebecca, the inquisitive muggleborn, and Staci, the sarcastic one, were his favorites. Long ago he'd

informed Cho that he wanted to work with them during meetings, and he found the small friendship that developed with them and their friends a rewarding part of teaching.

At first, a lot of the older students gave them a hard time. Lorne Zabini had loudly complained about Potter to his older sister and her year mates. And although Blaise couldn't care less that Harry was befriending them (actually, she thought it was encouraging), Draco and his goons made sure to notice. Draco made sure to try and intimidate them, but the first years managed to always stay in groups, which helped some. A little later, the D.A. had started, and the firsties made more friends that they could rely on to watch their backs. Cassiopeia and Orion Flint were the ideal protectors, and with the help of a few other key players, they helped guarantee the safety of any Slytherin below fifth year who choose to not follow Draco Malfoy's perverse ideals. There was safety in numbers

Harry was just silently remarking to himself how far the first year students had come; when Cho decided to make her move. The members had just all left, and only Harry and Cho remained behind; cleaning up the supplies as they often did.

"That was a great lesson today, Harry. I don't remember learning that sleeping spell last year. Is it new?" Cho asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "It's an old spell that isn't used often anymore, because potions are stronger these past few centuries. But before Dreamless Sleep potions, this is the spell mediwizards had to use. It only knocks a person out for about an hour, but in a duel, that's more than enough time. I taught it earlier in the year to the advanced group."

They were both arranging cushions on the floor now, in the far corner of the room. "How are they doing, by the way? I've been thinking about asking you if I could stop by just once, to see what you're all up to," Cho asked. She wasn't looking at Harry anymore, and was hugging the cushion she held to her chest.

"That would be fine. I've been hesitant to move onto the mild pain curses I know, but right now we're going over some binding spells

and minor healing stuff. I think after the holidays I might start up with some muggle sparing too. You didn't have to stay behind to help in the beginning group, so feel free to stop by anytime

"Harry?" Cho almost whispered. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure Cho, anytime."

Hugging the cushion to her chest harder, the oriental girl blushed as she forced herself to make out the words. Now she knew why it was so hard for Harry to ask, two years earlier. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to Hogsmeade with me next weekend?"

That got Harry's attention, and his head snapped around to stare her in the face. For the first time that year, Harry suddenly realized that he was alone in a room with his former crush and pseudo ex-girlfriend, on the floor among a pile of cushions.

"Ah, errr," Harry was at a lost for words, and didn't know how to answer. He still found Cho attractive, but any romantic feelings he once held for her were long gone. Not to mention, Harry couldn't afford the distraction that a relationship would provide.

"Cho," Harry tried again, "I flattered and all, but I don't think that's a good idea. We tried this once already, and it didn't work out. I think we should just leave it at that. We've become good friends this year, and I'm happy with our relationship."

Cho had looked up when Harry had first started to mumble, thinking he was excited that she'd asked. But when he rejected her outright, tears welled up in her eyes, and she almost started to cry.

"But I thought we could give it another try," she explained. "I know last year didn't work, but we really didn't know each other then. I was still upset over Cedric being killed, and seeing you reminded me too much of him. I'm over that now though, and I've come to know you better, and like you. I was hoping you'd feel the same." Her voice quivered with the last words, but she somehow managed to not lose complete control.

Harry just looked at her for a moment, thinking about how to best word his response. He was touched that Cho felt that way, but he just didn't. He couldn't force his own emotions, yet he didn't want to hurt her. Somehow though, he knew that wasn't possible; rejection always hurt. Still, the more honest he was, the less she'd suffer.

"Cho, I've always thought you very pretty, and it's true that we know each other better this year. Last year was a complete disaster, and I know most of that was my fault. But my life has changed so much since then, and things are very different for me now. I just can't be in a relationship until I know that whoever I involve myself with would be safe. To tell you the truth, I haven't even thought about you like that this year at all. I've been too busy with school and my studies, not to mention a few personal projects. I just don't have time. I'm sorry. I hope we can remain friends though, and you'll continue to help me out with the D.A."

Harry's explanation was like a slap to Cho's face. Sure, she knew things had changed, but she also knew Harry was lying as well, and she told him as much.

"That's all I mean to you then? A helping hand for the D.A., and a friendly face? I notice you have enough time for Ginny Weasley! Unless she's your personal project, why do you spend so much time with her? Everyone knows she's had a crush on you forever, and now it looks like she's finally getting her claws into you!"

Whoa! Harry didn't know Cho could be so vindictive, and he didn't like it. He didn't mind that she was upset or jealous, but that she trusted him so very little, and was attacking Ginny just for spite, was something that Harry wouldn't stand for.

"There's nothing going on with Ginny and me!" Harry yelled. "She's just a friend, and I spend a lot of time with her because we're Quidditch co-captains together, she's in one of my classes, and she's Ron's sister! And she got over her crush years ago. Didn't she even date your boyfriend last year? Speaking of which, what are you doing asking me out, when you've going with Michael Corner anyways?"

"We broke up!" Cho spat back. "And thank you so much for bringing that up! He only came to me because that trollop led him on, and then dumped him when she got tired! All he could ever do was talk about her. 'Ginny this,' and 'Ginny that.' Honestly!"

"So he sounds like you did last year, talking about nothing but Cedric then! People talk about their ex's! Jeez, I've only been in screwed up relationships, but even I know that!"

"Don't you dare compare me to Michael!" Cho was openly crying now, and wasn't trying to hold back. "Cedric was murdered, and I had every right to feel bad about it!"

Somehow that statement hit home, and Harry calmed down some, and took a deep breath. He really didn't want a repeat of last year's break up with Cho, and when he thought about it, he could see where she was coming from; even if it was a very skewered and twisted place.

"Look Cho," Harry said calmly, "I don't want to yell or argue. I just don't feel that way about you anymore. And even if I did, I'm not ready to be in a relationship. I've too much on my plate; much more than you could ever know. I thought I might be able to make it work this summer, but so far the only girl I've dated after you has already been killed. I can't take that happening again, or worse. I need to be left alone. I'm sorry if you don't accept that, or if you think there's something going on with me and Ginny when there's not, but it's the truth. And I'm sorry for yelling at you."

Cho deflated some at Harry's apology, but she wasn't ready to forgive him yet. The news that there was more going on in his life then she knew was disturbing, as was the girl he mentioned who died. She needed to think, and she couldn't do that with Harry around.

"I...I need to go." Cho didn't know what else to say, and put the cushion she was strangling down. Harry got to his feet to help Cho up, but she cringed away at his offer, so he backed away.

"I need to go," she repeated. "I'll talk to you later, Harry. Goodnight."

After she left, Harry stayed another few minutes, trying to figure out what just happened. It wasn't until he noticed he was already ten minuets late for dinner that he left. When he arrived in the Great Hall, Cho was nowhere to be found.

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Author Notes:

Well, it's finally here. For those of you who aren't part of my Yahoo! Group, it's been such a long wait for this chapter because I virtually had to rewrite 4 chapters. In an effort to speed the story up some, I tried to rearrange some key events. However in doing so, I royally screwed the pooch, and trying to fix it only made it worse. Rewriting the chapters wasn't difficult (although time consuming), but I did take my sweet old time, to make sure I was putting forth stuff just as good as the original was. I'm sure I missing something that I'll have to go back and add, but after countless proofreads, I think I got it all. I know nothing of extreme importance happened in this chapter, but that's why it's entitled "As Time Passes." I added a few things that should entertain you all enough. I enjoyed dropping Draco into the lake, I thought Hermione's duel against Rofordit was very in character for her, and the four new Death Eaters that Harry captured, although I skimped through how he got them and when, was some action and suspense. I abbreviated the Quidditch game (as I will for all future ones except the final), we know what the Ministry's up to, we got to learn a little about how Voldemort's handling the news of the missing Death Eaters, and we have an in-depth conversation with Cho finally. I'm laying the groundwork for future plot twists there, so don't look for any immediate answers to your shipping questions. I also want to address one thing that's been commented on, but something that I've noticed myself as well. This fic is very Harry-centric, and as such doesn't include a lot of peripheral characters. Unfortunately that includes Ron and Hermione. Now I know that JKR includes them in cannon almost as much as Harry, but I couldn't do that with the overall plot I have in mind. So please just enjoy what's here, and don't worry about them. They always make at least one appearance in each chapter, and I promise that my two sequels will be much more like JKR's works, with equal parts of Harry, Herm, and Ron.

This fic is about Harry taking a stance though, and he's chosen to do that alone, with little help.

Here's the part where I normally spend 2-3 pages responding to fan reviews. However, because of the sheer amount of reviews for Ch. 20, because of the long update time, I had too many to post comfortably. So I posted them all at my Yahoo! Group, in the "Files" section. Please go there to read all my comments. I responded to almost everyone who had more than a line or two to say, so please don't be scared off by the fact that you have to join the group to be allowed access. It's free and easy to join, and I promise you that I'm in charge of everything, and you won't be receiving spam emails or solicitations. You can also email me, to check to see if I responded to your review. It will be faster though if you check for yourself. The link's on my author page, so please take a look. Thanks!

## Chapter 22 – Duel in December

The days following the incident with Cho were grating on Harry. She avoided him at every chance she got, so he got no closure on the matter. He guessed he'd just have to wait until the D.A. meeting the following week, but didn't know what to do to get his mind off matters. Ron and Hermione sensed something was wrong, but when asked, Harry didn't say. It wasn't that he was trying to hide it from them, but rather he didn't want Ginny to know she'd been a major issue in his and Cho's fight. Harry knew he would feel bad if it were him in her place, and the last thing he wanted was Ginny feeling guilty for something she didn't do. She was no trollop, no matter what Cho said, and Harry swore to not let her learn she'd been called that.

Cursing his twin with the Cruciatus helped some, but not much. He threw himself into a few new books, but that was a waste too. Harry was too emotional to start studying a new subject, he realized after he had to reread a few chapters. Thankfully thanks to Hermione, he came up with an idea.

Hermione had asked to borrow one of his recording quills for her History class, so she could take better notes that week. Harry hadn't even used the quills yet, and lent one to her without another thought. Only after she left, did Harry remember what he originally bought those quills and the blank journals for in the first place. To record Seth's long lost spells and potions.

Seth had been quiet again lately, which wasn't much surprise. They still talked every night, and sometimes when Harry played Quidditch. But other than that, Seth seemed to be content to just watch Harry's life from the sidelines, and interrupt very little. After decades locked in a jewelry cabinet, not the mention the centuries before that doing Merlin knows what, Harry couldn't blame him. Even sitting though Professor Binn's history lessons must have been better than nothing at all.

So with a new task at hand, and one that he had more than a passing interest in, Harry set out to fill the blank journals with Seth's knowledge. The process wasn't as easy as he first thought it'd be, but

after a few trials and errors, Harry found a way to dictate to the quill, so it would write correctly.

He had to do that by closing his eyes, and turning away from Seth. The problem was, whenever Harry tried to repeat what Seth had just told him, the quill would record him speaking Parseltongue without him knowing it. Harry still couldn't tell the difference between when he spoke it or English, and only after he filled in four pages in the first journal, did Harry realize. The entry was nothing more than an odd collections of phonetically written hisses, and Harry almost laughed before he realized the system wasn't working. He could have manually written everything down in the journals, but that would take forever. Plus, Harry was worried that his hand might fall off from the effort. It was hard enough just to complete a fourteen inch parchment for Transfiguration homework; let alone completely fill in multiple lengthy journals.

It took two hours before Harry figured out if he closed his eyes and concentrated on something other than Seth, he could speak English properly to the dictating quill. That solved one problem, but the next presented itself soon after.

Seth, it seemed, although having experienced and witnessed extreme amounts of magic in his lifetime, had virtually no understand or basic training in it. Therefore, while he could list spell incantations and their effects all day long, he found it quite hard to convey the theory behind the lost spells, as well as their wand movements. Quickly Harry discovered that the grimories he'd planned to make wouldn't be so easy to write.

After much deliberation, Harry just chose to dictate as much information about each spell that Seth could remember. Each was incomplete (often not including the all-important wand movements), but Harry thought that he could go back later, and through more trial and error, discover the missing parts to each spell.

The list of potions Harry got from Seth was likewise more challenging than he planned. Many of the ingredients that Seth described (often by appearance and function, not by name) were extinct or endangered. Even more had new cross-bred counterparts, with

slightly altered properties. Harry knew he'd have to do some serious ingredient shopping and experimentation in the future because of all the complications. The potions too, to make matters worse, were often dangerous or life-altering, and required extreme amounts of care. Using the wrong ingredient, or the wrong ratio without taking precautions, could be disastrous. Not to mention the fact that if something did go wrong, because the potions were lost to the modern era, it's not as if Madame Pomfrey or even Snape could just whip up an antidote.

Still, the work was not only satisfying, but promising as well. Besides Quidditch practice and classes, Harry spent practically the entire week following Cho's outburst working with Seth. So devoted he was to filling his blank journals with as much of the ancient knowledge as possible, he completely ignored his friends until Ron confronted him about it. Ginny had just dismissed the team from yet another practice session, and instead of heading to the warm castle to get out of the cold, Ron marched right up to Harry with fury in his eyes.

Harry was still floating through the air, now that practice was over, once again planning out how he'd spend the rest of his weekend. There was only ten days left before the holidays, and besides the upcoming Quidditch game against Hufflepuff, and the Hogsmeade weekend that accompanied it, Harry hadn't planned most of his free time. So lost in his thoughts he was, Harry didn't hear Ron yelling his name from below. Not one known for his patience, Ron gave up after three attempts, and instead took a more direct approach. The first snow fall of the season had been just the day before, and Ron took advantage of the white blanket of snow to form a huge snowball. Packed real tight, like his brothers had taught him, Ron wound up his right arm and let the snowball fly. And just like a bludger to the head, it connected with Harry, and broke him out of his stupor.

"Ow, you prat! What'd you go and do that for?" Harry yelled down at Ron. The snowball didn't really hurt, but it had been large enough to almost knock him from his broom. Harry could have sworn he felt a chunk of ice in the center of it too. If he didn't know better, he might have thought Ron was trying to hurt him.

"Well, excuse me for interrupting your daydreams," Ron yelled back. "Practice has been over for five minutes, and I've been calling your name for just as long. You've been really out of it this week Harry, and Hermione and I are starting to get worried."

Harry deflated some at Ron's explanation, and floated his way down to address his friend eye to eye. Harry was aware that although he decided for himself to devote more time this year to his studies, Ron had not. And as in the past he and Ron had spent nearly all their free time together, Ron must really be suffering this year. Hermione could always fill in the extra time with studies of her own, but there was only so much extra chess and Quidditch Ron could play.

"Sorry Ron," Harry said, truly meaning his words, "it's been a strange week. Cho dropped one hell of a bomb last Wednesday, and to get my mind off things I've been working on a new project with Seth. He's not one for deep, meaningful conversations, so you can only imagine how frustrating it's all been"

Ron didn't know much about Seth, to tell the truth, except for the little Harry had told him and Hermione upon their first noticing the new jewelry. They knew he was sentient, and knew that Harry planned to divulge him of all the possible lost magics he knew, but that was about it.

"Yes, well, it's been strange trying to figure out your mood swings too, lately. One minute you're furious at Malfoy, then you're laughing at an article in the paper, then you go off by yourself for an entire weekend, and we only see you at meal times, if even that. Hermione still thinks you're grieving over that girl Amber's death, but I think that's a load of rubbish."

Harry started to fluster, and was about to set Ron straight, when he got waved off by an impatient hand.

"No, that's not what I mean, and you know it. I know you Harry, and I know you feel responsible for her death. No matter what, you'll always feel that way; about her, about Cedric, and about Sirius. But you've overcome those feelings before, and I just can't see how this time it would be different. It's been over a month now, and you've

never been affected by things this long before; not even for Sirius. And if you can get on with your life after him, then I doubt any girl you only met a few times would be of greater concern to you. That's all I meant. I just know it isn't about you still being hung up about her. It's something else going on with you. What is it?"

Harry wished he could tell Ron about the pressures he was under. He longed to tell someone, as if sharing the knowledge would somehow lift the burden. But Harry knew that wasn't so. And if he did decide to let others in on the prophecy, Ron certainly wouldn't be among the first to know. Harry loved him like a brother; that was certain. He also trusted him with his life. But when it came to keeping secrets, or matters of keeping one's temper, Ron wasn't at the top of Harry's list. It was sad really, Harry thought, that Ron would just as likely blow up and storm off to the Headmaster or his brothers, then to stay calm enough for Harry to explain why the prophecy's content was so important; and why it was imperative that Voldemort not get hold of the information.

"It's nothing Ron, nothing at all." Harry knew he sounded lame, and hastily added on, "I'm just nervous about a few things. The holidays are coming up, there are more Dementor attacks on muggles by the week. Not to mention the upcoming Hufflepuff match; and Summerby was really good last game. And Hermione's promised me a pop quiz in Potions before the term ended. I think her questions will be worse than Snape's, honestly."

Ron had to smile at that last bit, mostly because it was true. Hermione would be unbearable in determining Harry's Potions skill, and would drastically overcomplicate the matter, like she did with nearly everything else left to her own accord.

"Alright then," Ron said, "I'll let you off the hook for now, but you've got to ease up a bit. Holiday's are coming up, and Mum's really excited to be visiting wherever you call home these days. It's funny you know. We've all heard you describe the place, but no one can picture you living anywhere other then with us at the Burrow, or with those bloody muggles. It'll be odd to see you with your own place. I just hope Mum doesn't try to take over once she gets there. She'll

insist on cooking and cleaning the place, if I know here. And face it; I do. She's my Mum!"

Harry and Ron had a good laugh on the way back up to the castle, and Harry promised to himself he'd try to live up to Ron's suggestions. He did need to let loose a little. It was the last week of term, and where most students were winding down and fooling off more often, Harry had been doing the exact opposite. He'd been throwing himself into filling his journals with Seth's teachings, not to mention his other weekly tasks. But vacation time was fast approaching, and Harry swore he'd try to enjoy them when they arrived.

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True to his word, Harry put away all his extra readings and training material, and tried to enjoy the last week at school. He canceled both D.A. meetings that week (partly due to the still uneasiness he felt in Cho's presence), joined in some snowball fights and pick up games around the common room, and even made a trip to the kitchens with Ron, just for old time's sake. Harry did make the concessions of creating more prison cells in his trunk's compartment, but he swore off trying to fill them. Even though he had the names of more than two dozen confirmed Death Eaters he could go after, he decided to wait until after the holidays to continue his quest. Besides, the Hufflepuff Quidditch game was only days away, and if Harry got injured beforehand, both Ron and Ginny would kill him.

Harry was in such a good mood in fact, that during his Thursday DADA class, he decided to throw all caution to the wind, and take Professor Rofordit up on her offer of a duel. It wasn't a planned action on Harry's part, but he was feeling so relaxed and stress-free, and no one else had answered her challenge.

Once he stood to take his place in the center of the marked off dueling area, and the class realized that he wasn't joking, excited whispers broke out everywhere. Ron and Hermione were positively giddy with themselves, and refused to share their quiet conversation with any of their classmates. No doubt, they were discussing all the

advanced spells Harry might know, and what his strategy was going to be.

Even Rofordit, normally so stone faced before the onset of a duel, seemed a bit surprised. Honestly, she had expected him to be one of the first to accept her challenge at the beginning of the year. But when he didn't accept, she figured he must have had enough fighting in his life to be happy just critiquing from the sidelines. After one month, then two, and then three had passed, she didn't even look his way anymore. Now though, if only admitting to herself, she was a little excited not to mention intrigued at what the Boy-Who-Lived had to offer.

"Alright class, back up further than normal. If the rumors I've heard are even half right, I want everyone back as far away from us as possible." Professor Rofordit was only half joking, using her dry humor, but the tables were turned on her when the class practically jumped from their seats to comply. She had only bee around for a few moths, but his year mates had seen Harry in action more than once before. Not even the Slytherins were willing to stay so close to the action.

All this time, Harry was calmly standing to his side of the dueling arena, watching Rofordit direct the class. After she erected the protection spell that encircled the area, she turned to face him, an each bowed deeply in respect. Although the circular dueling area was a more modern and informal venue then the traditional dueling platform, proper dueling etiquette was still required. After bowing to each other, they each bowed to the class (a poor substitution of a judging panel), and then presented themselves in the ready position.

With eager voices, the class began to count down from five, as had become practice those last few months. Normally there would be a spark signal from the senior judge to begin combat, but thanks to a few false starts earlier on in class, Rofordit had adapted the easier solution.

"Five, four, three, two...."

Harry had his eyes locked on his opponent's, wand to his side, his body slightly turned to present a smaller target. Rofordit likewise was in an older version of a ready stance, which was more than she'd done for any of her other students.

Then all at once, every student (even Malfoy's group of Slytherins) screamed out "ONE!" in a loud, singular voice.

Harry made a small move to raise his hand, but Rofordit moved faster than the class had seen her yet. Either she'd been holding back, or she was using up all of her energy to try and get an early win. Either way, it was the first time she'd started the offense, and just the deviation from normalcy cheered the student onlookers on.

Harry didn't know what the curse she fired from her wand was, nor did he care to find out. He had learned long ago not to try and block an unknown spell with a shield, if it was possible to dodge. So Harry moved out of the way just barely in time, and missed the indigo light by mere inches.

After that, Harry had his wand fully raised, and each combatant eyed the other curiously. Each was waiting for the other to attack, and neither did.

Starting to circle to his right, Harry began to finalize a plan in his head he'd been thinking about for weeks. Actually, Harry had been tossing a few strategies around, but hadn't decided to use one over the other until just then. With the way they were both circling each other, without a lot of spell fire, Harry decided it was perfect.

Without the slightest hesitation, Harry began to fire curses nonstop at Rofordit. His aim however, seemed off, as all of them flew past her left side, as she continued to circle right. Harry knew from watching her with the others that she also preferred to dodge when able to, and Harry made sure to purposely make his aim far off enough not to worry his teacher.

Rofordit continued to circle, and instead of returning fire, fell back to her old game plan of waiting and watching. She didn't yet know what

Harry had in mind, but she wanted to have some idea before she committed herself to a plan of attack.

Luckily for Harry, Rofordit never once thought to look behind her, otherwise she would have seen some of Harry's spells hitting discarded student desks, and them being transformed into large stone slabs. Each was at least eight feet tall, three feet wide, and nearly half a foot thick. If she had managed to hear his spells, she might have known to look behind her. But because Harry was speaking so softly, so had no idea. Not every spell conjured a stone slab, though. Harry made sure to space them out only once every few feet. The other spells he used were just filler; low level jinxes than he knew Rofordit had to make the effort of dodging, but served no real purpose.

It wasn't until they made one entire lap around the dueling space, and Rofordit began to focus on the large objects behind Harry, that she noticed the slabs. Not sensing any immediate danger, she refocused on Harry, and was surprised to see him in the middle of casting a complex animation spell. She couldn't hear his exact words, but the large circular wand movement he made above his head was familiar enough. Hermione and a few other students laughed at Harry's gesture as he looked like he was miming using a lasso, but the laughter stopped a second later when all eight stone slabs jumped from the resting positions against the wall, and formed a large circular barrier around both Harry and their teacher.

Suddenly, things got a lot more interesting. The class could still see both duelers, but only barely. There was a two foot gap between each stone slab, and Rofordit was currently directly in the middle of them. Harry had been to a side, but slipped out of the circle once all the confusion began. For not only did the large stone slabs form an almost pen-like enclosure around Professor Rofordit, but they started to rotate in a clockwise motion, opposite of the direction Harry had been traveling not too long ago.

Not liking the new situation one bit at all, Rofordit leveled her wand to a stone slab and began to utter a curse. Having so many blind spots and losing sight of her opponent made her nervous, and she planned to blast the slabs out of the way as soon as possible. She almost got

that first Reductor curse out of her mouth too, before a jelly legs jinx fired at her from behind made her jump to the side, and in the effort, forget about her spell.

Harry it had seemed, after slipping though a gap in the stones, hid behind one so that he was completely hidden from her view. As it continued to move in a circle, so did he, and there was no way for Rofordit to know in which direction he was attacking from. The class could tell from their unobstructed view outside the stone circle, and a few had smiles on their faces at what many sensed to be an upset against the teacher's winning streak.

After that first jelly legs jinx, all hell broke loose inside the dueling arena. Both Harry and Rofordit shot spells at will. And while all Harry had to do was peak around a corner and fire towards the middle of the circle, Rofordit was at a huge disadvantage because she had to pick a random direction, and get her spell past the gap in the stones. She tried moving from the center of the circle as well, but for some strange reason, the stones moved with her. Unknown to her or the class, Harry had animated the slabs to encircle her, no matter where she went. So anytime she moved, the conjured stones would track to follow her, leaving her in a most vulnerable position.

Once she realized that getting out of the circle wouldn't be so easy, so returned to attacking the stone slabs again. She didn't have the time or concentration to start figuring out how to negate Harry's animation spell, so with a few more Reductors, she let off a barrage of curses aimed at the imprisoning slabs.

You can imagine her surprise when the spells failed to destroy the stones, but instead bounced off them, and heading back her way. Harry, in between running between stones, sometimes in either direction, had made sure to cast a reflection charm on each slab, just like he'd done with Dumbledore's floor when he used the restraining spell on Snape. The counter spell was easy to cast, but Harry didn't plan on giving Rofordit the opportunity to figure out what was done, much less cast the counter charm on all eight stone slabs.

No, instead Harry kept firing spells towards Rofordit, sometimes not even looking where he was aiming. It was good enough though, for

even if his spell didn't come close to hitting her, it would almost always hit one of the revolving slabs, and be reflected back at an angle. Then the rogue spell would ricochet off numerous other slabs, until it finally slipped through a crack, or was deflected upwards by Rofordit. Most times he was quick enough to catch Rofordit with her back to him. But sometimes he wasn't that lucky, and had a few close calls. It was only the sheer speed he was running in a circle outside the stone slabs, and the small gap between them, that afforded him some cover. It was easy for him to stop and fire a spell between them, as he knew his movements, and could control where he stopped. But Rofordit had to guess where Harry would turn up next. Sometimes he'd run complete laps around the circle, and other times he'd travel one slab at a time, taking a long pause between each jaunt. The long breaks made Rofordit assume she'd missed him moving on to a new position, and he was able to jump out from behind her in surprise.

In truth, Harry was amazed that she managed to last so long. It was hard to defend yourself from a full three hundred sixty degrees, with the enemy firing from behind strong barriers. In fact, by the time Harry finally decided to stop playing, she had managed to partially destroy three of them. Knowing he couldn't lose more cover, and than if he did she'd possibly get the upper hand in the duel, Harry made one more run around his circuit, this time making sure to be discrete enough to not let on where he was hiding. Then, not even coming out from behind the stone, Harry used the same refection charm on the ceiling of the classroom, right above the where Rofordit was standing. She didn't notice a thing (she was busy setting traps in case Harry decided to rush in), and without another delay, Harry quickly switched wands. What he had in mind required a little more power than he could normally provide, and Hedwig's wand was just the thing he needed.

None of the students saw him reach in his boot for his alternate wand, because Harry was at the far end of the room, on the complete other side of the circle than the class was watching from. And Rofordit clearly had no idea, as she was taking the brief pause in activity to reevaluate her position, and to formulate a more productive game plan. She never got the chance however, as in the next instant, she caught sight of a huge blast of light shoot from her left, towards the ceiling. Not directed at her, she didn't move immediately. But once

the spell bounced off the ceiling the same way the stone slabs had reflected spells, she tried to raise her wand, realizing she was too late. The wide bright light hit her before her wand was even raised halfway, and then she knew nothing. Rofordit lost consciousness the second the light reached her, and she got blasted across the room. Luckily, Harry had stepped around the corner right after he shot his debilitating spell, and was in time to catch Rofordit's body just before she would have crashed into a stone slab. At her age, Harry shuddered to think of the amount of Skele-Gro she'd have to drink if an accident like that had happened.

When Rofordit regained consciousness, the stone slabs were gone, the classroom was rearranged back to its normal setting, and Harry was sitting in his front row seat, with a slight smirk on his face. He knew he'd done a good job, and all the students around him knew it as well. Ron, Dean, and Seamus were conversing about how much fifty extra points would help them in the running for the house cup. Hermione had a clear look of approval on her face directed at Harry, and behind that one that Harry was sure was pleading to have the duel explained to her in detail later on. All the other students were talking loudly as well, and the two Ravenclaws who hadn't challenged Rofordit yet to a duel were jokingly complaining that now they wouldn't get the chance to earn the fifty points themselves.

"Ah, I know it's not normally my place to ask as a professor, but would someone mind telling me what happened?" Rofordit directed her question to the entire class, but was staring at Harry. He just smiled back, and grinned.

It took a full twenty minuets to fill Rofordit in on what she missed, and to discuss the duel in detail. It was much easier, in retrospect, to analyze each person's tactics and efficiency. Even Rofordit could properly dissect what Harry had used, and why, now that she had her full capacity to think clearly. Somehow, it was never the same when in the middle of a virtual war zone of spells.

The only thing Rofordit didn't believe, and even the class didn't understand, was the last spell Harry used to knock her out. Harry claimed it was a standard stunner, but they had all seen the spell,

and it wasn't like any stunner they'd ever seen before.

Even Hermione had her doubts, and she had seen first hand against the practice dummies how successful Harry was with his casting.

In the end however, it took the brave motion of Neville volunteering to be stunned, to prove his point. Harry didn't want to hurt his friend, but knew he had to repeat his success if he wanted Rofordit to believe him. And since he still hadn't switched his wands back to their usual holsters, Hedwig's was still strapped to his right wrist.

"Are you sure Neville? You don't have to do this." Harry wasn't sure why he was asking, but it felt right.

Neville didn't mind though. Merlin knew he'd been stunned enough during the last five years of classes and the D.A., and he was used to it by now. He even got up to stand next to Harry, and play taunted him with mock-insults.

"Come on Potter, can't stun little ol' me? I think you tired yourself out too much dueling Professor Rofordit. I bet I could take you on now. My Gran is tougher than you!"

The class laughed as a whole at Neville's remark (they all remembered the Snape-boggart incident), and Harry decided to just get the demonstration over with. Raising his wand, he smiled back at the once timid boy, and said, "I don't think so, Neville."

Neville's smile faded for an instant, and the next thing he knew, he was flying across the room, nearly five feet in the air.

All Harry had done was utter a simple, quiet, "Stupefy."

Because he was so close, the spell seemed to have more power than when he used it on Rofordit, but Harry was still able to catch Neville with magic before he could splat against the opposite wall. So enthralled was the professor, that she didn't even notice the two other students in the front row. Lisa Turpin and Hannah About were both unconscious in their seats, having caught some of the backlash of the

spell, as it hit and partially bounced off Neville. After Harry revived them all, no one doubted Harry's stunning ability again.

The class tried to pry facts out of Harry about how he'd done it all, but Harry just shrugged and said he'd been practicing. Rofordit herself didn't comment, but smiled and didn't hesitate to award fifty house points to Gryffindor for the win.

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"Crike Harry, when the hell'd you learn to do all that?" Harry was pleased that Ron had at least waited until they were back in the privacy of the common room to bombard him with questions. It was only a few minutes before lunch, but somehow Harry knew that he wouldn't be heading down to the Great Hall soon. Ron was practically bouncing in his seat with excitement, and Hermione had been biting her tongue the whole way up to the seventh floor, just waiting to begun her interrogation. Neville was pleased enough to just sit back and listen, although even he admitted to himself, that he wanted to know a bit more about Harry's new abilities.

"You know I've been reading a lot, Ron," Harry replied. He didn't want to get into full-explanation mode, but he knew he'd have to tell his friends something. "Well, that's just some of the stuff I've been reading about. And practicing, of course. You all saw the practice dummies in my trunk; what else did you think they were there for. None of the stuff I used in the duel is much beyond seventh year curriculum, I just made sure to have a sound plan. Some of the books I've been reading are on dueling tactics, and they help loads."

"Harry," Hermione interrupted Ron's retort, "there's no way you got that level of practice with only those dummies as partners. You must have been practicing with at least one other live person to have perfected those spells."

Harry had of course, but he wasn't ready to tell his friends about his time-traveling double yet. So instead, he just asked, "Why's that, Hermione?"

She got a blank look on her face, and Harry had to explain.

"I mean, the only real effective spell I used against Professor Rofordit was the stunner. Yes, it was real powerful, but that's only because it's one of the ones I've been practicing on." It was the truth too. Harry had been practicing both the normal stunner, and his personal one on the dummies for the past two weeks; since he'd finished his spell modifications. Harry had even almost used the modified spell against his teacher, but at the last second changed his mind. He wasn't sure he was ready to use it against a person for the first time yet, with such a large audience.

"If you think about it," he continued, "the only advanced spells I used, were animation and conjuring. And those don't require a person to practice with. Besides the stunner, the only other spells I used directly against Rofordit were small jinxes and light curses; more to distract her than harm her."

"But Harry..."

"Hermione, please, just leave it at that. Now, we're going to be late for lunch as it is, and I don't want to get between Ron and his food. So let's just drop this, and go down. I'm hungry."

"Bloody Hell!" Ron yelled out. "We're late? Good call Harry, let's go."

Ron didn't allow anyone to make up their own minds, as he immediately jumped up from his armchair, and herded them all towards the Fat Lady's portrait. Ron almost ran down the stairs, with Hermione walking briskly by his side. Harry was hanging back, but he could clearly hear Hermione lecture Ron about his manners.

"Honestly Ron, if we had just asked a few more questions, Harry might have let up on what he's...."

But Ron's stomach grumbled, he ignored Hermione, and they walked faster, out of sight around a corner. Harry smiled, and was content to take a more leisurely pace to lunch. Neville must have felt the same, because he fell in step, with wrinkled lines on his forehead.

“Something the matter, Neville?” Harry asked. With the exception of being in some of his harder classes, this year Neville was becoming a much different person. His new wand really did help his confidence, and Harry supposed it had something to do with that. Not to mention his developing physique, thanks to all the exercise done in the team’s small personal gym. It was rare these days to see Neville without a smile on his face.

“Not really Harry, I just....um. Do you think maybe you could work with me on my spells some more?” Harry paused and turned to look at his friend, but wasn’t given the chance to comment back. “I mean, the D.A.’s a big help and all that. I really do appreciate it. But that stunner you cast today was amazing! I can’t ever picture myself casting a spell like that. I just thought you’d be able to give me some pointers. In the D.A., you don’t really get a lot of time to work one on one with people, and I know you’re busy. But I would really like to improve more. I’m still getting used to my new wand, and I think I can do even better with it than I am now. And I want to make sure I’m ready in case something like last year ever happens again.”

“Sure, Neville.” Harry didn’t know what else to say. He was already tight on free time, but he also knew that Neville wouldn’t have asked such an imposition if it wasn’t important to him. And considering that Harry hardly spent any time with Neville outside of Quidditch practices, Harry thought he might even enjoy it. Neville was fast becoming a good, dependable, and capable friend. Much different than the person he’d been the first time Harry had met him, all those years ago.

“It will have to wait until after the holiday break though. I’m pretty busy right now. We’ve got the Hufflepuff game this Saturday, the Hogsmeade trip, plus I’ve got to get things ready at home. I invited Ron, Hermione, and their families over to my place for Boxing Day, and they’re the first house guests I’ll have. I have to make sure I’ve got everything I need, or else Mrs. Weasley will push me out of the way, and take over my own home.”

Neville’s face fell as he asked, “You’re going home this year? But I thought you never go home for Christmas?”

"Well, that's because in years past, it was the Dursleys I would have been going home to. Thank you, but no. This year though, I've got my own place that's Dursley-free. I can't wait for Christmas this year! It will probably be my best yet."

Neville swallowed his grimace, and nodded. "Yeah, sounds like fun. And yeah, after the holidays is fine with me. I don't think I'll have time either beforehand. Besides Quidditch practice, I promised Professor Sprout I'd help her get all the plants in the greenhouses ready for the break. Without the student classes, some of them will be sitting unattended for three weeks. That requires some special tending, so they don't die or go wild."

Harry didn't know that, but he supposed he might if he had kept on with NEWT level Herbology. Still, he asked Neville to explain more, and the two made small talk the rest of the way to lunch.

Walking to the Gryffindor table, Harry found that his friends had saved him and Neville seats. Luna was also joining them today, and was seated across from Ginny. Harry took his usual seat between Ginny and Ron, and Neville sat down across the table, between Hermione and Luna.

"What took you all so long?" Ginny asked. "Lunch is almost over, and we wanted to ask you what happened in your Defense class today."

Harry choked on the potato salad he was eating, and after being enthusiastically thumped on the back by Ron, managed, "What?"

"Rumor has spread about the duel you had today, Harry," Luna answered. "I've so far heard three different versions of what has happened, but I'm positive the one where you became invisible and turned the whole room into a mirror, so spells would bounce off the walls, is the truth. Nicely done. I always thought that your second wand would suit you better."

Harry choked on his food again and coughed, but thankfully he didn't have to answer, because Hermione had.

"Luna, that's ridiculous. Harry used a reflective charm; he didn't transfigure the entire room into a mirror! And he doesn't have a second wand. It's illegal to own two. Honestly, this isn't an article from the Quibbler!"

Luna nodded in agreement, perhaps just to appease Hermione, but she smiled secretively. After that though, she and what she had said were dismissed as the normal bunk that she often talked about. For that, Harry was glad. He didn't know how she of all his friends; the one he spent the least amount of time with; could have noticed his second wand. He hardly ever used it in public, and even then, he took care to make sure nobody noticed the switch. In the future, Harry knew he'd have to be more careful around Luna.

The rest of lunch passed uneventfully, with the exception of a few students coming up to Harry to congratulate him on his victory. Most were Hufflepuffs and a few envious Ravenclaws (they were the ones who thought they'd get the points; thanks to their smarts), but even a few of the younger year Slytherins ventured over; led by the Flint twins. It was hard to miss the sour look on both Draco and Snape's face, but somehow Harry thought their dislike made the victory that much sweeter. At that staff table, some of the others were also surprised by the show of school unity. None looked as pleased though as the Headmaster, whose eyes were positively glowing.

So busy trying to finish his quick lunch, and thank the persistent students, that Harry didn't notice Hermione was even gone until she retook her seat.

"Oy, where've you been? And pass the pudding."

Hermione passed Ron the platter with a disgusted look on her face, and turned to address Harry.

"Harry, I've gotten permission from Professor McGonagall for us both to miss Transfiguration today. She heard about your duel, and agreed that neither of us will fall behind for a single missed class. She said she was very proud, by the way, that we both thought to use advanced transfigurations in our duels. I don't think the fifty points to Gryffindor hurt either."

"Cor, we've all got the afternoon off then. My remedial Potions teacher canceled our class because of the holidays, and neither of you have other afternoon classes either. This is great! What shall we do?"

Not phased by Ron's enthusiasm, Hermione just shook her head. "No Ron, that's not what I meant. You don't think Professor McGonagall would just let us ditch class to do nothing, do you? No, I said I wanted the afternoon to test Harry on his Potion skills. The Headmaster asked me to make sure Harry was keeping up in his studies, and I've only checked up on him a few times. Today, I plan on spending the whole afternoon going over both out notes."

Harry gave a big theatrical sigh of disappointment, but he wasn't really that surprised. He knew he'd been let off the hook for too long already when it came to Hermione's supervision of his Potions' studies, and he'd been expecting something like this for weeks. That Hermione had thought to ask out of another class, so Harry would waste as little of his free time as possible, was just an unexpected bonus.

"See Ron, I told you she'd get her hooks into me. Don't worry though," Harry said, "she can't keep me forever. We've still got to be done in time for dinner tonight. I'm just glad I canceled the D.A., or otherwise I'd be asleep on my broom for Quidditch practice tonight."

At the mere mention of Quidditch, both Ron and Ginny turned to face Hermione, and gave warning glances.

"You better not tire him out Hermione, or else! We need him at top form this weekend. So no exploding cauldrons or dangerous potions, OK?"

Hermione almost laughed at their exuberance, but knew not too. She quickly promised, and as everyone filled out of the Great Hall on their way to afternoon classes, Hermione ushered Harry upstairs to the common room.

"Where do you want to do this?" Harry asked. "I don't think Snape's got a class this period, so I guess we can ask to use his classroom. Although, I think I'll leave the asking up to you. If I did it, I think we both know what the answer would be."

"I think you're right," Hermione smiled, "but it doesn't matter. We've got our own potions laboratory, remember? We'll just use your trunk."

That one caught Harry for a loop, as he hadn't had any of his friends inside it since he originally showed it to them. But he knew he couldn't refuse, as it really did make the most sense. Thankfully, Hermione bought his excuse that he needed to clean up a bit first, and he was able to warn his double to hide with the time tuners before Hermione crawled down the ladder.

"This place really is wonderful, Harry. You could do so much with it! And look at all the extra space you still have. Why, you could get some of those really rare cauldrons and ingredients, and make NEWT level potions. Professor Snape hasn't let us start on those yet. Crabbe and Goyle each lost a finger in an accident last month, and you weren't around to blame. So since then, all we've been doing is going over theoretical recipes. If you think the class was bad before, you should see it now. Still, it's interesting, and once we're allowed to actually make the potions, it will all be worth it."

"Crabbe and Goyle each lost a finger?" Harry was thinking about what Hermione had said about the extra space, so he almost missed the confession. Dobby and Winky had been much scarcer the last few weeks, and as opposed to the illusion he set up last time, this time their quarters really were emptied. Dobby had been going to the Black family vault everyday, sorting the contents for Harry, while Winky had been doing most of the house chores like cooking and cleaning. Harry had special Christmas presents for them both to show his thanks for their hard work, and couldn't wait to see their reactions. Still, Goyle and Crabbe each lost a finger? How dense were they?

"Well, the fingers are back now, aren't they? It took a full week for Madam Pomfrey to do it though. Still, it's nothing I'd want to happen to me."

Harry nodded. Re-growing the bones in his arm had been bad enough, but Harry couldn't imagine actually losing a body part altogether, and then having that re-grown. Ouch!

"So Hermione, how do you want to do this? I could show you the potions I've brewed since the year started, or I can show you the potion texts I've read, in addition to the class material. I'm already done with those. I'm about halfway through the seventh year material in theory, plus I'm doing the ancient potions research with Seth. That's coming real slowly, but I expect it to be a big payoff when it's finished."

Hermione's mouth dropped open as she listened to Harry ramble on. He had been straightening potion vials and ingredient stores while he talked, and was acting like what he said was no big deal.

"Harry! You've finished the reading for sixth year already, and are halfway through seventh? And you're doing more work on top of that? That's not possible!"

Turning back around, Harry grinned, "Sure it is! Without Snape holding me back, I've found Potions isn't that hard of a subject. I don't think I'll ever be able to be a true Potions Master, but I'm sure I'll be able to get an Outstanding on my NEWT exam if I continue at this level of study. It's just that Snape's been such a rotten teacher these past years, I think we've all suffered from it. The stuff we were learning when I left class is more like forth year material, really. At least, it has been in other countries, and in the past. But just like with so much other magic, people have gotten lazy over the years, and have lost knowledge."

With a look of determination on her face, Hermione pushed up her sleeves, and said, "Show me what you mean."

For the next two hours, Harry brought Hermione into his study chamber, and showed her all the potion texts he had. No longer was he scared of her finding a questionable book, because he knew now that he'd peaked her curiosity.

He started off with the simple stuff, and showed her all the tables and charts that would have helped tremendously if they'd been seen years ago. Snape had insisted they learn it all through trial and error, but it wasn't really necessary. Even the NEWT's Potion practical exam didn't require that students had to recall every single fact from memory. After all, how often was it that a person had to brew an unfamiliar potion, without at least having a reference book handy?

After the charts and tables, Harry quickly flipped though the textbooks of his first five years, and showed Hermione all the notes he'd made in the margins. They were all notes about how the potion might have been taught easier, and reference points directed to other books, that although rare to find or more costly, better explained the potion making process.

The advanced stuff was what interested Hermione the most. She had already borrowed a good deal of Harry's books for reading, but hadn't before been able to read his separate notes along with them. The cross referencing and theorizing he had done was remarkable, and even Hermione got a little jealous at the time and effort that must have been involved. She was also fascinated with the journals Harry showed her. He kept the spell notes to himself for now, but he didn't mind showing her the potion recipes that he'd been working on recreating with Seth in his spare time. None of the recipes were complete yet, but already a few of them were taking shape. And if Seth's recreation was even close to the original, Harry was sure to bring Potion Masters from around the world to his doorstep, each asking for a copy.

A full inventory of his stock potions was next on Hermione's list, and although she lifted her eyebrow at some of the concoctions, she praised his diligence. Harry argued that he only made the truth serums and pain relief potions because of their difficulty level, and that he planned to donate them all to the hospital wing at the end of the year. Veritaserum was the only potion that Harry didn't tell Hermione about, because it was so tightly controlled by the Ministry. There was no excuse for Harry to have a vast quantity in his possession, so Harry just passed it off as distilled water. It was a clear, odorless liquid, so Hermione never batted an eye.

With only an hour left before dinner started, Hermione insisted that Harry brew at least one potion in person for her. In so little time, there weren't many options, but thankfully Hermione had come prepared. The anti-venom of a Streeler was one of the most advanced sixth year potions on their curriculum that year. And although it didn't take very long to brew, it demanded intricately prepared ingredients and a steady hand in stirring.

Harry had never made the potion before, but had studied it, and was confident that as long as Hermione didn't break his concentration, he could perform well. Hermione agreed to keep quiet, and sat in the corner with a book, while Harry began to work. It took thirty minutes to fully prepare the ingredients, and then the brewing began. That only lasted another twenty, but it had to be constantly stirred. Lastly, the potion had to be cooled to specific temperatures in stages, which took up the remaining time.

Harry already knew he had done well when he turned his vial over to Hermione. She said she planned to test it the next day with some real Streeler venom, but she gave Harry a preemptive congratulations. The color was near perfect, and although a Potion Master like Snape could no doubt brew a better sample, she knew Harry's attempt would be satisfactory enough to meet normal standards.

Once they cleaned up and stored the excess potion, both Harry and Hermione made it to dinner with only moments to spare. Ron was amazed that Harry spent the whole afternoon doing potions with Hermione, and was still in such a good mood, but let the matter drop when Hermione kicked his shin under the table for making some off-color remarks.

In fact, almost everyone was in a good mood. The Hufflepuff game was only days away, and the Gryffindor team was eagerly awaiting the chance to show the school their much improved skills. The exercises Harry had shown Neville and Frank had all but ended their endurance problems, and all the boys on the team (they had all used the equipment somewhat) had become a little stronger.

Ginny, Natalie, and Connie were also working together flawlessly. They still didn't speak together during meals, but it was at the point now where no one even noticed; they were so in-tuned with each other. Not having to rely on hand signals all the time would free up their hands for more intricate maneuvers on the field, and Hufflepuff hadn't shown anything of that caliber in their last game.

Ron too was doing better. Just like Shelby the Hufflepuff announcer, Ron managed to get all the jitters out of his system during that first game. It was his goal to play in one lockout game this season, and he was off to a promising start. Practice sessions with him lately were amazing. Harry thought it was helped some by his new attitude towards Ginny. Before, Ron had been a little worried about her being in the air with the Slytherins. But against Hufflepuff, he knew he didn't have to worry about any dirty tactics. So leaving Ginny to her own merits, Ron could concentrate fully on guarding the hoops.

And while Harry didn't detect any noticeable improvement in his skills as seeker, that was hardly surprising. He was still in top form, and with his new broom, privately he thought he was unbeatable.

The only flaw in the team Harry saw that night, was surprisingly Neville. Not flawed because of his skill, but because he still looked like someone had killed his pet toad. Even since before lunch, Neville's mood had become dour, and Harry didn't know why. Hopefully, some mind-distracting flying that night would cheer him up.

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"Alright everyone, that's it for tonight. We've got one more practice before the game, Saturday morning. It's bright and early at nine, so don't be late! And you all better be over this slump. Now get lost!" Ginny dismissed the team, while Harry still floated above them, trying to ferret out what had gone wrong.

After the encouraging thoughts Harry had during dinner, he was severely shocked when the team all but fell apart during practice. At first everything had gone fine, but then one bad apple had spoiled the

bunch, and they were back to playing like a group of second year rookies. The bad apple: Neville.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard Harry tried, Neville never got out of the funk he was in, and his beater game wasn't up to par. Frank had been forced to take over almost all beater responsibilities, but without his partner, he started to make simple mistakes out of frustration as well. Phillip did what he could to alleviate the strain, but he wasn't used to working solely with just Frank.

The Chasers suffered from this naturally, and the too-many and too-hard hits they were receiving from the bludgers affected their play as well. A half hour into the practice session, even Ron in goal was yelling out commands to his fellow players (which were being ignored), and he was totally ignoring his own position. Harry hadn't even attempted to find the snitch, as he was too busy conversing with Ginny about what was happening. Once they decided to halt practice and take Neville out temporarily (in hopes that the rest of the team would get back in form), Harry hoped things would show improvement. But the damage had already been done, and the practice session might as well of been a write-off.

"Harry," Ginny said once the team had already left the pitch for the castle, "we've got to talk to Neville. I don't know what his problem is, but this is very serious. The game is less than two days away, and we're playing worse than we ever have before. Do you have any idea what's wrong with him?"

"No!" Harry threw his hands up in the air in frustration. "Sorry Gin, I just don't understand. He was in such a good mood earlier today. Then all of a sudden, he pulls a complete one eighty; and he's sulking. And I was there when it happened, and I don't even know why. It doesn't make any sense!"

Ginny cocked her head as she listened, and tried to put herself in his shoes. "Well, did you say anything that made him change? Or was it because of your demonstration on him today. You did curse him, right? Maybe he's feeling embarrassed, or resentful?"

"No," Harry shook his head, "Neville was fine with what happened in class today. In fact, we talked about it some, and he asked for some private help with his spells. He seemed really appreciative at the time even; almost relieved. If I said no I could understand why he might be in a bad mood, but I said yes! I told him that I don't have time before the holidays arrive, but once we're back in school, I'll meet with him no problem."

"What do you mean, when 'we' get back to school. You're not going anywhere for the holidays, are you Harry? You stay here every year."

"Not this year," Harry said. "In the past, I've only had the Dursleys to visit. Now I've got a place of my own. Besides, I've got a lot of errands that need to be done while I'm home. I've got to look through Sirius's vault more thoroughly, and I'm sure you've heard by now that I'm trying to sell Grimmauld Place. Plus, your family's visiting for Boxer Day."

At the mention of the Order of the Phoenix headquarters, Ginny's eyes went wide, and she immediately scolded Harry. "Quiet, do you want someone to overhear!"

Realizing his mistake, he looked frantically around, using his magic lens, making sure there weren't any prying ears. Luckily there were no blond haired spies, or anyone else for that matter, in hearing distance. Once he knew he hadn't screwed up, Harry cursed himself. He really did need to be more careful. This was the third time that he'd talked about private matters in public, without checking first to see if he'd be overheard.

"Sorry," Harry mumbled.

Ginny gave him a smile, "That's OK, but just be more careful next time. And yes, I did hear from the twins that you threatened to sell headquarters, but I thought they were joking. And why didn't anyone tell me we were visiting on Boxing Day? Never mind, you can tell me later, but I think I know why Neville's all sour now. Don't you know Harry? Neville's staying at school this year for Christmas! His gran and uncle Algie are off for the entire year, visiting relatives in Australia. I bet that Neville was looking forward to having you around

to keep company; possibly even working on those spells you mentioned. Now he knows that he'll be the only Gryffindor staying over for the break. Three weeks is a long time to spend by yourself. I bet that's why he's so miserable."

Forming a plan in his mind, Harry started jogging to back to the castle. "Come on Ginny, I want to get back to the common room before Neville turns in for the night. I think I know a way to cheer him up. If I can do that, perhaps we won't totally suck for the game on Saturday."

Running right behind him, Ginny called out, "Harry, there's no way we can beat them back to the common room. They must have a five minute head start on us, and it's not like Ron doesn't know about the same secret passages that you do."

"We'll fly then. I'm sure there's someone in the common room to open a window. That way, we can be there waiting when the team arrives." Harry didn't even wait for Ginny to agree before he mounted his broom. He was about to take off when he glanced over his shoulder, and saw Ginny broomless.

"Sorry," she said, "Ron took it, because he was going to polish and repair both of them tonight. You go though, and I'll just catch up."

Harry didn't want to leave Ginny behind alone, but he also wanted to get back to Neville before he could retire to the dorm rooms. Once he had his bed hangings closed around him, the privacy spells wouldn't allow Harry to wake or bother him. And since Harry didn't want the problem to fester all night long, he was in a real hurry.

"Quick," Harry said, not thinking of anything else, "jump on my broom. I'll fly us both up."

Ginny involuntarily shuddered at the mere thought. For years as a young girl, she had daydreamed about flying on the same broom as Harry Potter; even before she had met him. It was just one of those thoughts that nearly every young witch with a crush had at one time or another. And although now she had admitted to herself that she no longer had a crush on Harry, Ginny couldn't keep the small tingle of anticipation and pleasure away at the thought. More than a thought

really, because not wanting to hold Harry up any longer, Ginny slipped onto the back of his broom without an argument.

"Hold on," Harry warned her, not that she needed his advice. She'd been on the back of a broom with her brothers before, and knew she would certainly fall off if she didn't take a tight hold of the rider in front of her. Still she was nervous, but Ginny mentally scolded herself, saying that she'd touched Harry plenty of times before, and this was no different. If anything, she should be more embarrassed about the massage sessions the two had had. Over the months the two had gotten to know each other better, and each was familiar enough with the other's body to not be embarrassed by a simple broom ride. So, wrapping her arms around his waist, and pressing her chest against his back, Ginny was just glad Harry couldn't see the blush that crept all over her face as he took off into the starry night.

The flight took less than a minute, and indeed there was a third year girl eager to jump from her seat, and open the common room windows, once she saw Harry outside on his broom. The window opening was large enough for him to make his way inside, and soon he and Ginny touched down near the warm fire, in the midst of some curious looks.

"Um, Ginny? You can let go now." Had Harry not been so worried about Neville, he probably would have realized the slightly compromising situation they were in. His mind was far away from such thoughts though, and he didn't notice the embarrassed squeak from Ginny either, as she quickly let go of her grip, and dismounted from the broom.

"We beat them; that's good," Harry remarked. "I had no idea Neville was planning on staying at the castle alone. I was so excited about being home for a change, and all of you coming to visit, that I guess I didn't realize it."

Thankful for the distraction, Ginny asked, "Yes, you mentioned that my family was coming to visit. Did you mean just Ron, or everyone? I haven't heard a thing."

"Everyone," Harry said. Then thinking of Bill and Charlie being out of the country, and the last conversation he had with Percy, he added, "Or at least, everyone who's home, and willing to come. I invited your parents months ago in a letter, and then again in September. I also told Ron about it last month, when I invited Hermione and her parents as well. Sorry I didn't tell you too, I just assumed someone let you know."

"I'm surprised Mum hasn't said anything yet," Ginny admitted. "But it doesn't surprise me that the twins or Ron haven't said a word. They'd just assume like you that I knew. Believe me, I'm used to it! Mind telling me when I'm coming over though, and for what?"

Ginny had added a little of her special brand of attitude to her teasing, and picking up on it, Harry decided to flirt back.

"Well, you're all coming over for Boxing Day. I'm picking everyone up at the Burrow at noon, and you'll be spending the entire afternoon and evening with me, while we'll eat the splendid food I prepare, and exchange the wonderful gifts I've bought. And if you'd like to sample the scrumptious desserts, you'd better present me with a great gift yourself."

Ginny giggled at the extreme attention Harry was directing her way, and decided to continue with the flirt.

"And what, pray tell, is one of the many magnificent gifts you'll be adorning me with this year? Diamond earrings? Silk robes? No, don't tell me. I know! Perhaps a pool full of gold galleons to swim through at my leisure?"

Harry was laughing with her now, and dropped the pretentious act, as he'd run out of ridiculous things to say.

"Sorry Gin, but you'll have to wait and see. But I think you'll be pleased. Your gift is the one I've been working on the longest, getting together. Don't tell Ron, but I haven't even bought his yet. I know what I want to get him, but haven't had the chance."

"That's OK," Ginny assured him, "as long as it contains chocolate, I'm sure he'll be happy."

Harry laughed again. "Too true." He was saved from having to say anything more, by the portrait swinging open, and the Quidditch team marching in. Connie and Natalie went straight upstairs, no doubt to hit the showers, while Ron, Frank, and Neville plopped down in front of the fire to warm up. Hermione was with them as well, and Harry thought she must have met them in the hallways, coming back from the library. Whenever Ron and Harry weren't around to bother or entertain her, she often used the free time for more school work.

"How'd you two get back so quick?" Frank asked. Harry and Ginny just looked at each other and smiled, but said nothing.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said. Sitting down across a small table from the group, Harry looked directly at Neville, and came right out with his proposition. "Neville, earlier today when we spoke, I had no idea that you weren't going home for the holidays. I didn't know you were expecting some company either. Now that Ginny's been nice enough to point the obvious out to me, how'd you like to come to my place with me. It's a large house, and the only other person who'll be there besides me is Remus, and only part time at that. I could use the company. I could also show you some of muggle London, we could visit Diagon Alley, and even visit your parents at St. Mungo's. I still have some stuff to take care of after Christmas, but by then I'm sure you'll be comfortable to spend a few hours alone. So, what do you say?"

"Re...really Harry?" Neville had lost the sour look on his face, and in its place was one of hope and excitement. Harry thought he might have detected a look suspecting of something else, and he spoke real quick to address it.

Leaning close, so only Neville could hear him, Harry said, "Neville, this has nothing to do with pity. I've been at the receiving end of those acts before, and I don't like it. Honestly, except for Boxing Day when the others are visiting, I'm going to be all alone. I didn't even know that you were planning on staying at Hogwarts this year, until after practice. And Ginny wasn't the one to tell me to invite you. I really

want you to come. She just explained to me that when you asked about extra practice earlier, you had probably meant during the holidays. So, how about it?"

Looking around, as if asking for permission (and seeing only a bunch of nodding heads), Neville smiled and agreed quickly. He didn't want to be an imposition, and promised to not get in the way. But really, that's what Harry wanted; someone to spend his time with. The two had been dorm mates for nearly six years, and Harry knew that no matter what happened, Neville's worries about getting underfoot were not only silly but near impossible.

The group talked about the upcoming holidays a bit more, and half an hour later, went to retire for the night. The boys and Ginny still had to take showers, and Harry just knew that the team would be playing spectacularly on Saturday. Only one more thing was left to do before they all climbed the dorm stairs, and Hermione pointed it out.

"Hey Neville, don't forget to cross your name off the list for students staying during the break. Goodnight, everyone!"

The boys all wished her and Ginny goodnight as well, and waited patiently as Neville walked back over to the notice board by the portrait opening, and used a quill left out by another student to cross out his name. When he came back, he was smiling again, and the four boys laughed their way up the stairs. Frank left the group at his dorm, and once at the sixth year door, Harry began to get ready for his shower. He still used the one in his trunk, and Ron graciously let Neville have first dibs at the dorm facility.

An hour later, they were all in bed, fast asleep, and eagerly awaiting the end of term.

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Needless to say, after Neville's improved mood, Friday went by in a blink, and soon the Quidditch match was upon them. Hufflepuff could have been real trouble if the team was still in a slump, but their previous troubles were a thing of the past.

Even with the practice Summerby had done over the summer with Puddlemore United professionals, and the advantage of Hufflepuff having their own house member as the announcer, Gryffindor won the game easily. From the moment the balls were released, their chasers were a bit faster, their beaters a tad stronger, their keeper a little more accurate, and Harry was playing his best game ever.

In just the first few minuets, Ron had blocked his first goal, and Ginny and Connie had each scored once. Feeling so confident, Harry called out to the team to practice some of their more advanced plays. Most didn't result in a goal, but Gryffindor got valuable experience using the tactics against another full team.

Ron also got a few more great saves, although he didn't get his wish of playing in a shut-out game. Hufflepuf managed to scores twice against him, but only one could be counted as a real goal. That had been made by Ernie Macmillan, and had been a great throw. The other goal had been made another, but not because it was a great shot. No, that one had been made because Ron was too busy laughing to try to block the quaffle. Zacharias Smith, as team captain and leading the play, had passed the ball, and then proceed to fly directly into the center hoop post. Ron had felt the vibrations beneath him from the hit, and had a great bird's eye view as Smith dropped like a fly to the earth below.

Still, less than a half hour into the match, Harry had spotted the snitch, and took off after it. Summerby gave a good chase, but in the end he was still to slow and too cautious to outperform Harry. He did have a few opportunities to foul Harry away from the tiny golden globe, but thanks to Hufflepuff's beliefs, Harry knew he didn't have to worry about that.

The end score was 200-20 in favor of Gryffindor, and like before, Ginny and Ron made sure to sneak to the kitchen and bring back plenty of food for one hell of a party. McGonagall had to break it up herself sometime after midnight, and Harry went to sleep happy with his performance, and eagerly looking forward to the Hogsmeade trip the next day.

The trip too, went off without a hitch. This time the group didn't break up, but went around together. A few of Luna's Ravenclaw friends joined them for awhile, and Dean and Pavarti joined them for a drink at The Three Broomsticks. Cho was there at another table with Marietta and some other girls, but even when she turned her back to him, Harry was in far too good a mood to take much notice. He even went so far as to buy the table a round of drinks, to show that he held no hard feelings. Harry and Cho obviously weren't meant to be together, and it was still debatable whether they could be friends or not. There was no reason however, that they had to be rude or unfriendly.

Ron stocked back up on candy, and unashamedly purchased a few select items around town that Harry knew were last minute Christmas gifts. Hermione and the girls were more considerate, and when they had to pick up preordered packages, they made sure they were wrapped and put away out of sight.

Harry picked up some stuff as well, but most of his gifts he either had already ordered, or would pick up later. Having access to muggle London before the holidays, insured that he could make unique purchases away from the prying eyes of his friends. For himself though, he bought another few books, some candy, a pair of ear muffs, and a large pot of floo powder. He knew he had some left at his Hideaway, but it wasn't nearly enough for the number of visitors he'd have in the weeks to come.

The only bad experience Harry and his friends had the whole day was the unavoidable run-in with Draco Malfoy. On the way back to the castle, he and his goons stopped to gloat about their holiday shopping, as if Harry, Ron or the others really cared he was getting Professor Snape a size twenty eight gold cauldron.

"So you've got to buy your grades, as well as your friends, huh Malfoy?" Ron spat. "That's pathetic, even for you!"

"What's it to you, Weasel? I wonder what you'll be receiving for Christmas. A dirty, torn, used cloak, perhaps? Of course you'll have to share it with your dozen other siblings, but I dare say you'll be happy with it."

Ron almost pounced on Draco as normal, but was held back by Ginny and Hermione. They had grabbed him as soon as Draco had begun to speak, as they knew Ron would react badly.

"Don't mind him any Ron," Harry said, "he's just jealous we've all got loving families and friends to spend the holidays with. His father probably just tosses some money at him, and spends the rest of the day licking Voldemort's boots. He'll never know what it's like to have a mother who sacrifices hours of her time to knit a jumper for him, or one that even says 'Happy Christmas.' Maybe we should all chip in this year and get Draco a gift; something proper for a change. After all, his dad can only purchase so many new broomsticks, which still can't outfly mine, before he runs out of things to buy." Harry knew he was being mean, but Ron needed the ego-stroking, and Draco really did deserve it. A smart man by now would have learned just to leave enough alone. There was no way Draco could get the best of Harry, especially with all his friends around.

Draco looked furious, and Ron laughing in the background didn't help matters. "Why you little shit, Potter! What do you know about family or gifts? What, do your dead parents send you presents from whatever hell muggle-lovers get sent to when they die?"

Harry knew he was being baited, and didn't rise up to it this time. "No Draco, they don't. But I've got other friends and family to take their place. I'm spending the holidays with Neville and a friend, and Hermione, Ron and Ginny, and their parents are coming to visit. Now if you'll excuse us, you're starting to ruin my Christmas spirit. If you'd like to return a gift to us all Draco, you can consider not returning in January."

Luna laughed hysterically at Harry's joke, and the others' normal laughter was cut short out of embarrassment. Even Harry cringed, because his corny comeback sounded all the more pathetic at Luna's overenthusiastic outburst. Still, Draco had stormed off in a huff, and that was always a good thing.

The group had a few more hours of good times before they had to retire for the night, and Harry had all but forgotten about Draco's short

interruption. When the time came to use his time tuner, and repeat the week from inside his trunk, Harry didn't even mind.

That was the quickest week he'd ever spent in solitude. The promise of a holiday away from work, school, and unwanted pests made the time fly by, and Harry got a lot of work done. He kept up with Seth's translations, and made a lot of progress on the anti-Dementor spell as well. Harry took another shot at meditating on his animagus form, but after five hours of nothing new, gave up.

The Cruciatus training was unpleasant as always, but after his experience with the curse in November from the naked Death Eater, Harry was glad he'd been through the painful training, and had no intentions to stop. He used his pensive to review all the Death Eater captures he had made as well, looking for flaws in his strategies. He found some most of the time, and reenacted in his mind the way he could have done things, and hypothesized on how the results could have been.

When Sunday rolled around for the second time, Harry had been very pleased with himself. He'd had one of his most productive weeks in the trunk ever, and he was still looking forward to the upcoming vacation. After all he'd done, Harry felt he deserved it.

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Three days later, Wednesday morning right after breakfast, all the students were packed and gathered in the Great Hall, awaiting the arrival of the school carriages that would carry them to Hogsmeade's train station. No Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs were staying at the castle, and only a handful of Ravenclaws and Slytherins had signed the final list, so the Entrance Hall was jam packed. Trunks and pet cages lined all walls, and the distinct smell of B.O. was starting to fill their nostrils.

Not much had happened Monday and Tuesday of that week. Classes were held as normal, but not much work was done. Try as they might, the professors couldn't get the kids to concentrate properly, and even they themselves anxiously awaited the holidays to arrive. Little homework was assigned as well, and most of the students didn't

worry about it, or even think to bring home their texts. Like every year before, most of the homework would be done scrambled together on the return trip on the Hogwart's Express, or the first day back at school.

Mr. Filch was even attempting to order some of the students around, not that anybody was listening to him. There wasn't enough free room to mop the floors of wet snow like he wanted, nor could he single out just a few offenders for the punishment, out of the nearly three hundred students. Finally, Hagrid opened the great double doors, announcing that the carriages had arrived, and like a mass exodus, the students rushed for the exit.

Harry managed to snag a carriage for himself, Ron, Neville, and Frank, and trusted the girls to situate themselves. They had been pushed away in the crowd, but Harry knew that Hermione and Ginny could handle themselves. With any luck, they'd even arrive at the train first, and reserve their usual compartment.

Once the carriages arrived in town, it was a mass rush all over again, only this time in reverse; out of the carriages. All the packed luggage and cages were being loaded by the house-elves unseen, so there was no heavy lifting to slow anyone down like on the normal Hogwart's Express trips Harry had taken. He himself had his own trunk, but that was only because it was shrunk down to size, and comfortably stuffed in his rear pocket.

"This is insane!" Harry yelled over the noise to Ron, motioning with his hands at the out of control behavior of the others. "Is the trip home at Christmas like this every year?"

Ron nodded. "Just about. I haven't gone home in awhile, but this is what the twins and Percy always described. I guess everyone's too excited to see their families, to care much about manners. For once, I'm glad I'm not the only one!"

Harry and Neville laughed as the climbed on the train. Frank had said his goodbyes to join his own friends, and Harry led the way to the back o the train, where his group usually sat. Sure enough, in the third to last compartment from the back, Harry found Hermione,

Ginny, and Luna already inside, looking out the windows at the scattered students.

Each boy took their seat, and joined the girls in watching a few last minute goodbyes between friends and classmates. It was interesting, really, to see just who got on with who. Everyone became a little emotional during the holidays, and it was entertaining to see some of the normally more reserved students hug and kiss their friends goodbye. Perhaps the funniest thing they saw, was a tearful Pansy Parkinson sobbing all over Draco's shoulder, and a look of absolute horror clearly written all over his face. Crabbe and Goyle were snickering behind Pansy's shoulder making kissing noises, and that made the scene all the more funny.

"Hallo, you lot! Didn't think you'd be off without saying goodbye, now did you?" Hagrid had just stepped in front of their window, and his sizeable frame blocked out all the other sights.

"Not at all," Hermione said. "Have a Happy Christmas Hagrid! We'll see you when we get back." Hagrid thanked her, and all the others made similar sentiments. Harry could have sworn he saw a few tears in the giant's eyes, until he turned to face Harry himself, and Hagrid blinked twice.

"Merlin Harry, is that you? I didn't know you were going home to the muggles this year? Well ain't that a surprise!"

Sheepishly, Harry said, "Well, I am going home, but not to the muggles. Hopefully, I'll never have to go back there again. Truthfully, I'm looking forward to my first real Christmas away from school."

Hagrid should have been happy for his friend, but instead he looked nervous. "Er, right then Harry. I'll see you all later then, alright? I gotta go now. I gotta catch someone before the train leaves. Bye! And Happy Christmas everyone."

With Hagrid gone, and most of the students aboard the train already, the group settled down to await the trip. Ron had already unpacked his chess set in hopes of a game, and Luna had her head buried in the latest edition of the Quibbler. Harry and Ginny were talking

possible Quidditch strategies against Ravenclaw for the next game, and Hermione was asking Neville about some of the preemptive treatments he had used on the plants in the Greenhouses for the long winter break.

The train should have started to move by then, but yet is sat still. It all made sense a moment later, when Professor McGonagall entered their compartment, looking directly at Harry. Harry had a feeling he knew who Hagrid had run of to suddenly, and he had a similar feeling that he knew what Professor McGonagall was going to say.

“Mr. Potter, what are you still doing here? The train’s about to leave, if you don’t know, and you’re still on it. I understand wanting to say goodbye to your friends, but enough is enough already! It’s time to go.”

Without waiting for a response, she opened the sliding door and left, obviously waiting for Harry to follow her. Imagine her surprise when Harry didn’t even so much as stand, and instead called her back into the cabin.

“Er, Professor, what makes you think I’m only saying goodbye to my friends? I’m actually going home this year, and I’m pretty excited. I thought that was obvious when I didn’t sign up on the sheet for students staying over the break.”

“You’re going home? To the muggles? But I thought they didn’t allow you to visit them during the year?”

“They don’t,” Harry said. “But I’m not going there. I’m going home, I said. I’ve got my own place now.

Beginning to get flustered, McGonagall crossed her arms over her chest. “Harry, your home is with your relatives. As you know perfectly well, you must live there to access the ancient protections Professor Dumbledore has put in place. If you’re not returning to the Dursleys, then I’m afraid I can’t let you leave Hogwarts.

Harry somehow knew this was coming, but was still angry. ‘At least Professor Dumbledore isn’t here for this,’ Harry thought, ‘otherwise it might be harder.’

“Why?” He asked. Harry was tired of explaining himself to “adults” about his situation, especially when the answers were obvious.

“What do you mean, why?” McGonagall shot right back.

“I mean, why aren’t I allowed to leave Hogwarts?” Harry answered very curtly. “I’ve told Dumbledore for months now what I think of the Dursleys and his supposed rule over me. If it doesn’t involve schoolwork, then he’s got no say in the decisions I make. I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself, and I’ll have Neville to watch my back if things get sticky. Right Nev?”

It took a second for Neville to wipe the surprised look off his face, but he gave a strong nod in McGonagall’s direction.

“I’m sorry Harry, but that’s not good enough. Unless you’re going to your relatives, you’re not allowed to leave. I don’t make the rules.”

“What rules?” Harry yelled. “Seamus went to visit with Dean’s family two years ago, and nobody said he wasn’t allowed. Are you telling me you’re positive that everyone on this train is going to their guardians’ home, and nowhere else? Because only then, and only if you can point out a school rule that says I must go to the Dursleys’, and nowhere else, will I get off this train.

“Mr. Potter! You’re a special case, and you well know it. We cannot afford to take that kind of risk, and the Headmaster has specifically informed me that you are to stay at Hogwarts this Christmas.” McGonagall was beginning to lose her composure now, and Harry was sure it was because not only wasn’t she getting her way, but because she had to scramble with all of Harry’s friends in witness.

Harry’s friends, speaking of which, who were staring dumbfounded at the two. They’d never seen Harry stand up to a staff member before (unless you count Snape), and they’d never seen Professor McGonagall get so flustered.

"Well, I never asked to be a special case! And I don't think there are any specific rules written about me in the Hogwarts' bylaws. What Dumbledore thinks what I need is his own opinion, and nothing more. And I won't follow his opinions as rules unless they apply to everyone else. I won't hear otherwise, and I'm not getting off this train. And if Dumbledore's not happy with that, then he can come down here and explain it to me himself."

"That's Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Potter! And unfortunately the Headmaster is unavailable at the moment, tied up with Ministry business."

Harry laughed, "Well, isn't that convenient. It's obvious to me at least, that Professor Dumbledore knew I wouldn't stay at school, and sent you because he was too cowardly to beg me himself. Face it Professor, I'm traveling on this train to London, and there's no school rule that says he can make me stay."

Outraged now, McGonagall drew her wand, but only to cast a silencing charm with it. "Mr. Potter! I cannot allow you to remain, and I'll have to remove you by force if you leave me no choice!"

For the first time, Harry stood, and drew his own wand. Calmly though, opposite to how Professor McGonagall was acting he said, "Professor, I feel bad that you've been put in this position. You can blame Professor Dumbledore for that later, because he shouldn't have made you try to enact his own will against me. But I don't think it's right to set a double standard for the rules when they apply to me, and if you try to remove me by force, then likewise I'll try to defend myself. I'd rather not see that happen, but if it's a choice between my freedom and rights, and bowing to the wishes of an old man who has no legal right to interfere with my life, then I choose fighting for my rights. And even if you do manage to move me back to the castle, you can be sure I'll try to get home anyway. I can walk to The Three Broomsticks and floo to Diagon Alley; I can use a broom to fly away in the cover of night; I can even have Hedwig teleport me away in a flash, and no wards or spells can stop her from that."

Hedwig hooted her agreement from a corner, where she was perched in the luggage rack. None in the compartment had noticed her since the argument had started, and by the look in her eyes, and the tilt of her head, Harry could tell she was enjoying it immensely.

"You'd really use your wand against me, Harry?" McGonagall had a surprised and hurt look in her eyes, as she had let her normal passive face drop long ago.

Harry nodded. "In order to stop you from using yours against me; to uphold the wishes of Dumbledore, who has no right to ask you to do this; yes, I would."

Sighing, Professor McGonagall put her wand away. "Very well then. I don't agree with you, and I can promise this action will have some unpleasant consequences when you return, but I'm not about to duel you in a train compartment over this. The one thing I agree with you on is that the Headmaster should have enforced this himself, instead of dropping the problem in my lap. You two clearly have issues, and addressing them is not part of my Assistant Headmistress responsibilities. Just be safe, Harry. You have no idea how dangerous You-Know-Who and his followers can be. If they find out you're alone and unguarded, they will certainly attack."

"Pocketing his own wand, and returning to his seat, Harry replied, "If you're referring to Voldemort Professor, then yes, I do know how dangerous he is. More so, I'd say, than you realize. I can take care of myself though, and I promise I'll be perfectly safe. You all couldn't find me this summer, and neither could the Death Eaters. I'll be at the same place, and it remains just as safe as before. I'll see you in January."

McGonagall nodded, not saying another word, and left after removing her silencing charm. Two minutes later the group saw her enter a school carriage, and the train began its long trek.

"Harry Potter!" Hermione hissed. "Are you insane! You just refused to obey the order of our Head of House, and threatened her with your wand as well. You could be expelled for that!" Ron and Neville were nodding their agreement, but Ginny spoke up in Harry's defense.

"Relax Hermione. Like Harry said, whatever was going on there, was obviously between him and Professor Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall shouldn't have had to play referee. That was unfair of Dumbledore. I'm impressed that Harry stood up for his beliefs, and I think he's right. He shouldn't be treated special if he doesn't want to be, and Dumbledore can't force him. Only his guardians have any legal say, and I doubt the Dursleys would care one way or another what Harry does."

Harry smiled. "Thank you Ginny, and you're right. I wonder if Dumbledore will try that; going to the Dursleys to try to convince them to put me in his custody. It won't work, though. The second they hear my life would be in danger if I did what I wanted to, they'd throw him out of their house so fast his beard would smoke; wizard or no wizard. They'd do anything to see me get hurt; especially if the thing they had to do was nothing at all. Unless Dumbledore resorts to using the Imperious on them, there's not a chance in hell I'll have to do what he says.

"Blimey mate!" Ron said. "But still, did you have to talk to her like that? Even if nothing happens because of it, McGonagall's sure to punish you when we get back to school. Have you ever suffered through one of her detentions? It's torture! I thought scrubbing cauldrons and cleaning suits of armor was bad enough. But no! She makes you grade first and second year transfiguration essays. The one time I had to do that, I thought my eyes were going to fall out! I had to search dozens of textbooks to see if their answers were right, and then I had to summarize both their work, and the grades I gave, before she was satisfied. It was horrible!"

Hermione almost looked excited to get a detention from the Transfiguration teacher, and the look caused Harry to laugh, and lighten up some.

"Look, I'll send her a note in a few days to apologize for my attitude, alright? But I'm not going to apologize for my decision. I shouldn't be forced to stay at Hogwarts if I don't want. The problem exists totally outside of Hogwarts business, and I can treat it as such. She should

be able to as well, and hopefully we'll be on OK terms once classes start again."

Ginny thought it a wonderful idea, Luna suggested Harry send Professor McGonagall roses as well as an apology, Hermione congratulated Harry on his maturity (where was it ten minutes ago?), and Ron still thought he was loony. Neville still couldn't believe Harry had stood up for himself so adamantly, and was more intrigued about where they'd be staying for the next three weeks than before.

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After the confrontation with McGonagall, the train ride was uneventful. Ginny left to spend some time with Dean, Seamus and Lavender joined them for an hour while Ron slept off his chocolate-induced coma, and the Flint twins from Slytherin came by to wish Harry a Happy Christmas. Unlike the rest of the school, they weren't looking forward to returning home, as they knew they'd have some explaining to do. With Death Eater parents, Harry had talked to them weeks ago about a possible cover story. He told them that if they tried to stand up to their parents, and it looked like they might be hurt or punished, then they could instead admit to spying on Harry. Thinking like a true Slytherin, Harry told them a few small details about his summer, that while wouldn't comprise his security or talents, would let on to some unknown facts about Harry's previous summer activities. Hopefully, it would be enough to convince the twins' parents and fellow Death Eaters, that they weren't siding with him. Perhaps Draco would lay off them in the future as well, if the news got to him that the Flints' were loyal to Voldemort, and not to Harry, like they acted.

When the train stopped at the station, Harry could already see the mass of redheads outside the windows. And as desperately as Harry wanted to greet the Weasleys on the platform, Harry knew the security risk was too much if someone had written ahead that Harry was on the train.

"Ron, please apologize to your parents, but I don't want to leave the train. There's a chance me on the platform will cause some problems, so we'll just leave from here."

"Mum won't like that, Harry," Ginny admonished.

"I know, but there's nothing I can do. Like I told Professor McGonagall, I'm going to be safe, even if that means acting a bit like Moody. I'll see you all in a few days, and you can always write if you want. I've charmed Pig and Rowen to be able to break through the magical signature wards at my place, so you won't have problems writing like you did last summer. Just tell her I'm sorry."

"OK mate, it's your death wish if she doesn't like it and finds you!" Ron gave Harry a manly thump on the back, and wished him well. Then he did the same for Neville, and left the cabin, giving the others more room.

Realizing that they were saying goodbye, Luna gave each Harry and Neville a brief hug, and kissed the back of their hands. Hermione and Ginny tried not to laugh, but couldn't help it. Luna either didn't notice though, or didn't care, and went to join Ron in finding their trunks.

"Bye Harry! We'll see you on the twenty sixth, alright! And do be careful. Write if you need anything." Hermione then reached up and kissed Harry on the check, wiping away some of her lip gloss she left behind. Done with Harry, Hermione moved over to Neville, and Ginny took her place; now done with the other boy.

Ginny had seen the kiss Hermione had given him, and knew that she'd been doing it for at least two years. Ginny had never considered it before herself, but this year was different. He knew Harry much better than before, and considered him one of her closer friends. 'Hopefully,' she thought, 'he feels the same way.'

"Have fun with Neville Harry, and don't corrupt him too badly." Bravely, she too reached up and went to kiss Harry on the check. Her nervousness however caused her to shake, and she missed just slightly. Instead of his check, she landed her kiss half on it, and half on his lips. She was mortified!

"Er, thank Ginny. I mean, I won't corrupt him too badly. See you Boxing Day." He didn't know what else to do, as the kiss had stunned him just as badly, and could only offer up a lopsided smile.

The look Harry gave her caused shivers to run up her spine, and grabbing Hermione's arm, Ginny bolted for the exit. A last cry of "goodbye" over their shoulders was all Harry and Neville heard.

"That was weird," Neville commented. Harry wasn't sure if he saw the kiss between he and Ginny, or was merely referring to their departure, so thought best to avoid the conversation.

"Yeah, it was. Anyway, ready to go Neville? You've got your trunk, right?" Neville nodded, and patted his back pocket where his trunk resided.

Like Harry instructed, instead of letting the house-elves load it on the train, he had shrunk his trunk with his wand, and kept it himself. Because the spell wasn't a built-in design on the trunk like Harry's was, there were limitations, but they didn't pose a problem. Apparently, the normal shrinking feature didn't allow for live beings to be shrunk, like with Harry's trunk. But as Neville had gotten Professor Sprout to feed Trevor during the holiday, who was staying in the warmth of Greenhouse seven, Neville didn't have to worry. Convincing Neville to leave Trevor behind was easier than Harry thought it would be. Harry wanted Neville to have fun and enjoy himself; get lost in exploring muggle culture; and he knew that chasing down the elusive toad would be counterproductive to that. Surprisingly, Neville agreed quickly.

"Yup, you still haven't told me where we're going though, or how we're getting there. Won't we have to get off the train no matter where we go?"

Harry grinned, "No, we're traveling by portkey, if that's alright. If not, I suppose we could ask Hedwig to take us with her. That would be more uncomfortable though."

"No, portkey's alright, I'm just surprised. It doesn't sound as if Professor Dumbledore made it for us, and I don't know anyone else who would have the knowledge. Are you sure it's safe?"

Taking a stone out of his pants pocket, Harry said, "Yep, safe as can be. This portkey takes us right to the building I live in. There're some security precautions once we get there, but nothing we can't handle. Now, place your hand on the stone, and we'll be ready to go."

Neville did so without delay, and Harry was briefly taken aback at how much his friend really trusted him. Neville was about to take a portkey made by an unknown person, to an unknown place, with very little details about what he'd be doing for the next three weeks. Harry doubted he'd do the same in the other boy's position, even if it were Neville offering him the portkey.

Shaking his head clear, Harry spread his feet to prepare for the rough landing. "OK then, here we go. Hedwig, we'll see you at home girl. Three, two, one....Activate!"

Each felt the familiar tug behind their navel, and soon they were swirling though space. The trip didn't last long, and mere moments later, Harry crumpled to the ground in the basement of his apartment building, while Neville just appeared in the same stance he had been in on the train; standing fully upright.

"And people say I'm the klutz!" Neville jested, holding his hand out to help Harry up.

"Shut your trap," Harry answered. He'd been in the magical world six years now, and must have portkeyed two dozen times at least. But still Harry wasn't any closer to landing on his feet when arriving, then the very first time he'd used one at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Maybe I can teach you how to land on your feet, in exchange for the spell work you'll be helping me with. It's the least I could do."

"You mean there's something to actually learn?" Harry nearly yelled.  
"Why didn't someone tell me before?"

"Well," Neville looked guilty now, "it's kind of been a running joke the past few years. Ron originally was going to tell you how to land firmly, but liked the fact that he was better at something than you; even if it was silly. Me and Seamus were let in on the joke, and eventually it just became our thing. The theory applies to landing when using floo powder as well, and even Dean's been told the secret, with all the visiting he does at Seamus's house during the holidays. It is kind of funny, you've got to admit, that the great Harry Potter lands on his arse whenever he travels."

"I don't think it's so funny," Harry muttered.

"What was that?" Neville asked.

"Nothing."

"Are you sure you didn't say anything?" Neville asked again.

"Yes I'm sure," Harry said. "And if you want a bed to sleep in for the next three weeks, you'd better be sure too!"

"OK, OK," Neville laughed, "I'm sure then. You didn't say a word. I'm positive."

"Right," Harry said. Walking over to the lift, Harry pressed the call button, and turned to explain to Neville what the contraption was.

"This lift is kinda like the one in the Ministry we took last June. OK, Neville? When we get on, there's loads of buttons for different floors, and all we gotta do is press the right one, and we'll be home. Ron got kind of freaked out when Hermione tried to explain muggle lifts, so I want to make sure you understand."

Neville frowned though, and his forehead creased between his eyebrows. "If it's muggle though, and not magical, then how does the lift stay up?"

"Wires," Harry answered. "Strong steel cables support the lift, and there's safety breaks and all sorts of stuff to make sure it can't snap or anything. That only happens in bad movies."

"You mean these things break?" Neville asked nervously. Harry was confused at first, until he realized that Neville had no idea what a movie was, and so didn't understand Harry's explanation.

"No, they don't. Don't worry, Nev. I only meant that it happens only in fiction; not in real life. These lifts can hold hundreds of kilos, so we've got nothing to worry about."

Neville accepted his answer that time around, and when the lift arrived, both boys entered, one more anxiously than the other.

"Now Neville, listen closely. I live on the thirteenth floor, but as you can see, there's no button for thirteen." Harry saw the button himself, but knew his friend couldn't yet. "To be able to get to my home, you have to think of this phrase in your mind. Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor. When you think it, and the button appears, press it. The ride shouldn't take long."

Neville closed his eyes, and a moment later opened them and pressed the correct button. If he was surprised about its appearance, he didn't show it.

"Fidelius Charm?" Neville asked, halfway up the lift ride.

That caused Harry to blink, as he expected he'd have to explain to Neville what had happened once they reached his Hideaway.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"My Gran and me were placed under the Fidelius, right after my parents were attacked. I don't remember it of course, but Gran talks about it all the time. Professor Dumbledore cast the spell, but Great Uncle Algie was the Secret Keeper. If Dumbledore cast this one too, but isn't the Secret Keeper, I can understand how he doesn't remember where this place is."

"I'm my own secret keeper," Harry explained. Harry was going to point out if he wasn't, then Neville never would have been able to see the button. He did add, however, "Dumbledore didn't cast the spell

though; I did. At the time I didn't trust anyone else with my security, and I spent weeks learning and practicing the spell."

This time, Neville looked shocked. "That's rare magic though, Harry! Where'd you learn about it, much less how to cast it? I don't even think that information is in the Restricted Section!"

"I'll show you the book I found the info in sometime. But we're nearly there." And Harry was right, for not a moment later, the lift doors opened up, and Harry could see his home, as spotless and orderly as the day he'd left it.

"Neville, welcome to my Hideaway!"

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#### Author Notes:

I hope you all enjoyed Harry's duel with Rofordit, as well as the other stuff that happened this chapter. Writing the argument with McGonagall was personally a lot of fun, as she's a great character to write. There was a bunch of fluffy romantic crap in there too for the Harry/Ginny shippers. Well, not romance as you probably would wish it would be, but as romantic as I get anyway. All the quick glances they share; the nervous shivers they get when they touch each other. And the missed kiss on the cheek? Come on! How classic is that! Also, hopefully those of you who have been complaining about the lack of action and story advancement will be pleased now. The next three chapters will span the Christmas break, and each will have its own type of mini-adventures and drama. Trust me, a lot will happen, and I've been looking forward to posting these chapters for a long time. I'm going to try to post the next one before Sept. ends, but don't hold me to that. And of course, if you'd like current news about chapter progress, or would just like to talk to me and other fans of the fic, please join my Yahoo! Group. The link's on my profile page, and it really is worth it. I try to make the site as rewarding as possible, because I know that the hassle of joining (it's really easy!) doesn't always appeal to everyone.

And like the last update, I've decided to respond to all my chapter reviews in my Yahoo! Group as well. The file can be found under (coincidentally enough) the "Files" section in my group, and I encourage everyone who left a review to read them. If you don't want to join my Yahoo! group, but would still like to see the responses, then please let me know in an email. I'll email the file to you personally, although it may take a few days for me to get off my lazy ass. Honestly, joining Yahoo! would be faster.

That's it for now, and hopefully I'll be writing you all again in a few days. Later.

Ross

## Chapter 23 – Twas the Time Before Christmas

Neville stepped out from behind Harry, and for the first time, took a long look around the place where he'd be spending his holidays. It was an impressive place, and only one thing came to the boy's mind.

"Holly shit!"

Harry just laughed. "Thanks, Nev. I think."

His face reddened with embarrassment, but Neville couldn't help it. He was a pureblooded wizard, and as one had come to know formal, intimidating decors and furniture. The comfortable and modern decorations that adorned Harry's place though was a different beast, yet still as decadent.

"Sorry, Harry, but, I mean, wow! This place is amazing. I knew you lived by yourself, and when you said you lived in an apartment building, I was expecting a small flat, perhaps. Ron was even saying I'd have to sleep on a cot, if Professor Lupin was staying over, as you couldn't have more than one guest room. But this place must have half a dozen!"

"Nine bedrooms actually," Harry admitted, "ten if you count Dobby and Winky's. I expanded some rooms to be larger than they appear, and the two hallways traverse the entire length of the building. This is actually the whole floor, and was originally a bunch of separate flats. I just took down all the walls, and made it one big space. Give me a moment to dump my trunk in my room, and get settled, and I'll give you the grand tour. Make yourself at home in the meantime. If you're thirsty, there should be drinks in the fridge. That's the large box in the kitchen. Sorry; muggle appliance. I expect dinner will be ready soon, so don't eat too much. You'll be OK?"

"What?" Neville asked. He had hardly been paying attention, as he was still busy taking in the enormous room. "Oh yeah, I'll be fine. Drinks in the fidge, er, in the kitchen."

Leaving Neville alone, as he climbed inside the giant fireplace, Harry left for his room, glade to be home. Once inside he expanded his

trunk, and began to unpack his clothes. He could live out of it easily, but growing up muggle, Harry always preferred to use a dresser when one was available.

"No Mr. Harry Potter sir, you mustn't be doing house-elf work sir. Please be leaving the chores for Winky to do!"

The squeaky voice caused Harry to turn around, and he was ambushed by Dobby, tackling him around the knees. Harry would have fallen if his back wasn't to the oversized bureau. Winky too was present, although more composed than Dobby. Harry hadn't seen her personally in a week (she had left his meals in the icebox in the trunk while she was busy with the chores all to herself), but she looked very nice in a new dress and shoes. Harry doubted that she was making new clothes for herself, and suspected that Dobby had bought them for her. Luckily he had more taste in picking out women's fashions than he did when it came to matching pairs of socks.

"Hello Dobby, Winky! It's good to be back home. How's everything here?"

"Everything is okey-dokey, Mr. Harry Potter sir," Winky answered, "there is being no problems while you is gone. Strange men is being washing windows outside the building twice since you left, but men not be seeing inside. He not even washing your windows properly, and Winky be having to do it herself."

Harry smiled. "That's OK Winky. Those men are probably paid to wash the building's windows. They're not looking inside or washing ours because of the Fidelius Charm. That's normal, and it will continue to happen. Alright?"

"Whatever Mr. Harry Potter says, Winky!" Dobby exclaimed. "It is so good to be having Harry Potter back home! We is going to have very god times, right Mr. Harry Potter sir?"

"Yes Dobby," Harry agreed, "We'll be having a very fun time. Listen, I need to talk to you about the progress you've made in Sirius's vault, but that can wait until tomorrow. Winky, I'll also take over feeding and

responsibilities for my guests in the trunk this week, alright? This is time for you to be on vacation too."

Winky looked mortified. "No Mr. Harry Potter sir! Sir should not be spending time with bad men. It is Winky's job to do! Winky will take care as always, and sir won't be bothered."

"That's alright, Winky," Harry assured her. "Now that I'm home, I won't mind. Besides, I brought a guest home with me. Remember me telling you about Neville? He's outside right now, and I'm about to show him around. Think we have time for a tour before dinner's ready?"

"Plenty of time there is Mr. Harry Potter sir," Dobby promised, ushering Winky out of the room. Sir can take as much time as needed be, and Dobby and Winky will be keeping dinner ready and warm.

Dobby seemed pleased enough, but Harry knew that Winky was still upset about having her chores lightened, because she was reluctant to leave the room. Knowing what would cheer her up, Harry motioned her to stay, but Dobby to leave.

"Remember Winky, we'll be having a full house of guests the day after Christmas, and we've got to cook a big meal. I think the total number will be fourteen people, although as many as seventeen could show up. Now I want you to prepare some of your best holiday dishes, and make a list. I'll get the supplies later in the week. And remember Winky, you don't have to do all the cooking yourself. I want to help."

Winky made a strange face at Harry's statement, and he thought something was wrong.

"What's the matter, Winky?" Harry asked. "Is fourteen people too many on such short notice?"

"No Mr. Harry Potter sir, fourteen people is being just fine," she squeaked. "Winky is just thinking that Mr. Harry Potter always overcooks his foods. Winky is thinking that it be better to leave the cooking to Winky and Dobby alone."

Harry had to laugh at that. He always thought he was a good cook, but apparently not compared to house-elf standards.

"Alright Winky," he promised, "I'll leave the cooking up to you. But I want to make my own dessert. We'll see if any of the guests can tell the difference between our baking."

Clapping her hands like an excited schoolgirl, Winky was very pleased. "Yes Mr. Harry Potter sir, you make good choice. Now holiday meal won't be burnt! Winky was very worried over sir's insistence, but sir is a good master, and knows he can't outcook Winky."

"We'll just see Winky, we'll just see."

When Harry returned to the main room, he couldn't find Neville anywhere. Knowing that dinner was already waiting for them, Harry wanted to show Neville around quickly, and get the tour out of the way.

"Oy, Neville!" Harry called out. "Where are you?"

"In the library Harry," he heard as response. "This place is brilliant. Has Hermione been told about this?"

Walking into the library from the entrance near his suite, Harry said, "No, not yet. It's mostly empty still. The only books here are ones that I read this summer. The rest I've got in the smaller library in my trunk."

Neville looked up from the book he'd been paging through, and took another look around the shelves. "But there must be over a hundred books here, Harry. There's no way you read these all this summer."

Harry didn't feel the need to mention that a lot of them were the muggle paperbacks that he leant to his imprisoned Death Eaters. "Well, not just this summer really. I transported all the books I've read so far at school back here as well. As I finish each book in my trunk

library, I move it here, unless it's a book I keep around for reference. Even then, I have easy access to these books."

"Easy access?" Neville asked. "What, does Hedwig carry them back and forth for you?"

"No," Harry laughed. "Although I think she would if I asked, she's no carrier pigeon. I think she'd be angry with me for using her for such a menial task. No, I can leave a pile of books or a list for Dobby and Winky, and they usually bring them back and forth between here and my trunk. They're making the trip anyway, so they don't mind."

"Dobby," Neville mumbled to himself, "where have I heard that name before?"

"Oh, sorry. Let me introduce you. Dobby! Winky! Come greet Neville!"

A second later two small pops sounded to Harry's side, and Neville was momentarily startled at the house-elves' appearance.

"Welcome to Mr. Harry Potter's Hideway, kind friend of great sir. Yous is most welcome to be staying here. If there be anything yous be needing, Dobby and Winky are only too happy to help." Dobby spoke for both of the tiny creatures, but Harry was pleased to see Winky wasn't hiding behind him anymore like she normally did. Perhaps being around more kind people lately had strengthened her confidence? Well, that was something both she and Neville shared.

"Uh, hi, and thanks, I guess," Neville said. Not knowing what else to do, he reached out to clasp Dobby's hand, and hand his whole arm nearly shaken off. Winky was tentative to take Neville's outstretched offer, but gave a dainty little shake after the moment's hesitation.

"Hey, you two look familiar. Haven't I seen you around Gryffindor Tower before? And aren't those some of Hermione's hats from last year?"

Harry wasn't surprised Neville recognized the hats, as they were very hard to miss. Dobby currently had seven perched on his bald head; a record low number for him. And everyone in Gryffindor had at one

point the year before seen Hermione planting them around the common room.

"Oh, such a great friend Mr. Harry Potter sir has, to remember Dobby and Winky, and Miss Hermie's wonderful hats. You both is great wizards, for knowing poor Dobby and Winky? We is not worthy of being recognized."

"Er," Harry interrupted, "that's it for now Dobby, Winky. We should be ready for dinner in about ten minutes, and you're welcome to join us if you haven't eaten yet."

Winky politely accepted for them both, and with a snap of her fingers, and another puff of smoke, they were both gone.

"Kind of like you, don't they Harry?" Neville joked.

Harry had to laugh. "You have no idea. I doubt they'll settle down before it's time for us to go back to school. It took me nearly the whole summer to get them to stop calling me Master, and they still insist on 'Mr. Harry Potter sir.' It'll be interesting to see what they end up calling you."

Neville furrowed his eyebrows. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't they just call me by my name?"

"Because that would be too easy," Harry smiled. "So far, Ron's called my Wheezy, Hermione is Miss Hermie, Professor Dumbledore is Dumbleydory, and Remus is Reemy. I tried to get them to pronounce everyone's name right; you can imagine how Ron reacts to Wheezy; but I gave up months ago."

"Maybe they can just call me Nev. It sounds better than Nevley, or something else like that. I'll ask them at dinner."

"Good idea," Harry said, "but I wouldn't get your hopes up. Anyway, how about that tour now?"

Neville agreed, and soon they were walking the long hallways together. Harry started with the east wing first, and went to the back

with the empty two bedroom flat and small rooms. Neville asked about the flat, and Harry explained that it was the size of the original units, and for some reason he just left it there. It's not like he needed even more space, Harry explained, and he could always clear it out and change it later if he liked.

The storage room was empty except the extra muggle appliances Harry didn't need, and with the exception of one set, Harry said he'd be selling them soon. Likewise, the weight room was also empty, but this time Harry said he'd have to buy new equipment to fill it up. The machines that had been in there previously, Neville wasn't surprised to hear, was the equipment Harry had moved into Gryffindor Tower after their first Quidditch disappointment. That had been basic, non-electric equipment, which Harry was looking forward to replacing. It was fine for when Harry first started to work out, but now that he was experienced, and had plenty of access to electricity, Harry hoped to get the best new equipment possible.

The dueling chamber was just like the one in Harry's trunk, so Neville skipped that room too, even though they both knew they'd be spending lots of time in it. Harry hadn't forgotten his promise to help Neville out with some spells, and after they got settled in, promised they'd spend some time in there each day.

The only other room before the major stuff was an empty space, and Harry explained it was one of three in his home that he didn't have a use for yet. Neville thought he could make some suggestions, but not seeing the rest of place yet, kept his mouth shut for now.

Harry's bedroom, again, was almost an exact replica of the one in his trunk, with the exception of the extra door that led to the muggle room. Neville spotted it right off, and once through, felt he had stepped into another world.

The furniture and decorations were all similar, but at least to Neville's eye's, the rest of the contraptions were truly foreign.

Harry showed him the wetbar and keg of butterbeer (which made Neville smile), but only briefly went over the telly and billiards table. Neville understood that they were both used for muggle

entertainment, but Harry didn't have the time right then to explain more fully. And as anyone introduced to television for the first time could attest, with only five minutes before dinner would be ready, it was a good thing Harry never turned the thing on.

Walking through the library (which Neville had already seen) to get to the west wing, Harry quickly showed Neville all six of the guest rooms. Each was decorated differently, but all had the basic same layout and furniture, and Neville already knew he wanted to stay in the room with Gryffindor colors. Now that he had his new wand, and was doing better in school and with his magic after so many years of failure, Neville explained that he finally felt worthy of being a Gryffindor. Harry made to protest, but was waved off by Neville quickly. No matter how much his attitude had improved, he still had a long way to go before he felt his true worth. Harry promised to help work on Neville's self imagine too over the holidays.

Skipping the other two empty rooms (Harry didn't want Neville to see what remained of Wormtail's cell), the last room in the west wing was the laundry. Neville recognized the machines from the extra sets earlier, and Harry explained briefly how they cleaned clothes. Intrigued, Neville told Harry to remind him at dinner to ask Winky if he could watch her sometime in the next week do the wash. Harry had to laugh at that. While not quite as fanatical as Mr. Weasley was, Neville was still very curious at how muggles survived without magic.

The living room area, long dining table, and fireplace were all self explanatory, so Harry brought Neville to the kitchen, so show him around. Winky and Dobby were busy setting the small table behind them, and Harry had just enough time to show Neville the fridge, and warn him about the gas stove, before the two elves called them to the table to eat.

To say dinner was a memorable event was an understatement. While Dobby and Winky had gotten used to eating with Harry and sometimes Remus, Neville was an unknown to them both, and made dinner awkward. Harry tried to find conversation they could all join in on, and it helped tremendously that Neville sensed the awkwardness, and tried to include everyone as well. It was for reasons like that that Harry was glad he had made such good friends with Neville. Ron;

while perhaps they had more fun together; would never had been considerate or polite enough to include Dobby and Winky's feelings during a meal.

At least the food had been great, which was no huge surprise to either boy. Neither had ever known a house-elf to cook bad food, and Winky made a particular good impression when she offered Neville second helpings on dessert, and asked him his favorite foods that she might prepare during his stay.

When they all had their fill (Dobby and Winky had finished long ago, but sat happily enough until the boys finished), Harry helped clear the table and wash the dishes, while Neville settled in his room, and unpacked his bags.

"Nev is very nice wizard, Mr. Harry Potter sir," Winky pleasantly said while drying the serving plates. "Winky was worried at first that kind sir's friend would not like having improper house-elves around, but Nev not seem to mind at all."

"Winky," Harry said, "how many times do I have to say it; you're not improper elves. You're just different, that's all. I'm different too, and so is Neville, in a way. It's our differences that make us who we are, and there's nothing wrong with that. You and Dobby are very special to me because of that reason. Otherwise, I wouldn't have wanted to hire the two of you, now would I?"

"We know Mr. Harry Potter sir is very great wizard," Dobby said, "and Dobby and Winky are different because wes be taking pay and wearing clothes, but what is making sir's friend different, sir?"

Harry thought about that one. Many reasons came to mind, but a certain one stood out in, and before he thought about it, he told them both about Neville's similar upbringing. Both had lost their parents early on in life, had been raised by strict relatives, had constant self-doubts, and yet each had grown into two different, but equally talented individuals. Neville had a knack for Herbology and a fierce loyalty, and Harry's skill in DADA was matched only by his determination. He made one small mistake however, and on the first

night back home, Harry thought he might have already sent things straight to hell.

"Winky is very sad to hear about Nev's parents. Winky once heard Master Party explain Crucio spell, and Winky still has bad nightmares about it.

Speaking before he thought his answer through, Harry said, "I wouldn't be surprised Winky! Batry Crouch Jr., along with Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange, were the ones who cursed them. Neville still visits them at St. Mungo's every year, but they've never once recognized him as their son. Their minds are too far gone."

Harry would have gone on, but stopped when Winky let out a loud gasp, and clasped her hands together under her chin, wringing the dirty dishtowel together.

"Young Master Party was one responsible?" She asked; lips quivering. It was only then that Harry remembered that Winky wasn't just familiar with the Crouches, but had been their house-elf her entire life until two years ago. Winky probably helped raised the man who grew up into a monster, and by the look on her face; a look Harry knew well; she was suddenly feeling very responsible.

"Oh! I'm sorry Winky; I didn't think. Yes, Barty Crouch Jr. was one of those responsible. It wasn't your fault though. I'm sorry I brought it up. Let's talk about something else."

It was too late though. Before Harry even finished speaking, Winky had huge tears leaking down her face, and was bawling uncontrollably. Dropping the dishtowel she's been using, she raised her hands to cover her face, and began to run for her small room. If the situation wasn't so sorrowful, Harry would have found the sight of Winky running right under the table hilarious. It wasn't though, and both Harry and Dobby just stared at each other; neither knowing what to do.

"I'm sorry Dobby," Harry said after the small bedroom door shut behind Winky, "I didn't think. Is there anything I can do to make Winky feel better?"

Dobby shook his head. "Mr. Harry is most kind for asking, but Winky just be needing time alone. Winky still misses her old masters, and still misses being a proper house-elf sometimes. Tomorrow Dobby will let Winky clean the entire house by herself, and that will make Winky feel better. Dobby thinks that Mr. Harry Potter sir should lock up the butterbeer for tonight; just being in case. Winky has not had butterbeer in months, but Dobby is knowing the temptation is still present."

Harry nodded. Dobby then left to comfort Winky, and Harry made short order of what was left to clean. Knowing Dobby, he'd return in the middle of the night to finish it, and Harry felt it was the least he could do. Harry also went to the muggle room to put a small locking charm on the butterbeer tap, so as not to forget before he went to sleep.

"Hey, I'm all unpacked. Where'd Dobby and Winky go to? Winky promised to show me this telly thing." Neville was done settling in, and found Harry sitting in a quiet corner behind the billiard table.

"She's not feeling well, and retired early. I said something that upset her after dinner, and she reacted badly." Swallowing his discomfort, Harry added, "Now that I think of it, you might react badly too."

Harry had to let Neville know that he'd told Dobby and Winky about his parents, if only for the fact that he probably should have asked in the first place. But now he also felt he needed to admit that Winky had been the Crouch's house-elf for years, and how he thought Winky might act weird around him, because of her guilt. Surprisingly, Neville didn't mind in the least.

"You can't blame her, really. She's a house-elf! The Crouch's weren't all bad, and even if they were, she was bound to serve them at the time. As long as she didn't help curse my Mum and Dad, why would I be angry at her, or she feel bad around me? I hope she calms down some."

Again, Harry was impressed. "Thanks Neville, for being so understanding. If you don't mind, could you possibly tell that to Winky

next time you see her. She's incredibly sensitive, and I think it would help a lot if she heard that right from you. If not, we might have a drunk house-elf stumbling around here the next few weeks."

"No problem! Although I think seeing a drunk house-elf would be a little funny. Imagine them trying to clean while not being able to stand. That would be a hoot! Maybe we can give her some spiked eggnog when the time comes? Anyway, so what do you want to do now? It's still too early to turn in yet."

Not having the time or patience so late at night to attempt to explain the telly, Harry settled for showing Neville how the billiard table worked. Neither were very good, as most of Harry's experience with the game was learned from books and movies he'd seen growing up. It had been months since he last played, and even then, he never did have any competition. He tried playing against himself once, but the time-traveling Harry was just as hopeless. Remus had played Harry during one of his visits, but after thoroughly embarrassing himself, decided to retire from his "professional career." The next time he stopped by, he had a dart board with him, which he mounted next to the wetbar. Darts was a muggle game Remus was more familiar with, and opted to play opposed to pool on his subsequent visits.

Neville caught onto the basic rules of eight ball pool quickly (they weren't that hard to understand), but had the most difficulty with gripping the cue stick. Harry knew from experience how hard that was, as his own grip still left much to be desired. Still, the two had fun for almost two full hours, sinking each other's balls by mistake, ragging on the other for missing the break, and one time because Harry had done real well, only to sink the eight ball before his final solid. That was the only game Neville won fairly.

It was after eleven at night when Harry decided to call it quits. Not knowing how Winky would be feeling in the morning, and wanting to give her some personal space, Harry told Neville to get some rest. Tomorrow they'd be exploring muggle London to do some shopping, and Harry correctly assumed that Neville would be blown away.

It was bright and early the next morning, not a house-elf in sight, when Neville finally came out to meet Harry. He'd been up hours

earlier, normally to do his morning routine, but now unable because of a lack of equipment.

Harry supposed he could have used the machines in his trunk, but since unpacking it, Dobby had stored it away in the storage closet, and Harry had been too lazy to go dig it out. Besides, he was on vacation, made very apparent to Harry at least by the lack of his double.

Three days ago when the other Harry hadn't shown at his usual time, Harry knew he'd made the choice to lay off the time travel during his break. Frankly, he'd been working so hard lately, he thought he deserved it! So not having to share his shower or workout equipment with another (not that he chose to work out that morning), Harry had been left with the problem of occupying his time until Neville woke.

That had been solved easily enough though, as Harry walked through his home and made a mental list of the many things he needed to purchase. Earlier in the summer, Harry had been so relieved to be rid of the Dursleys, the place had seemed perfect with just the basic furniture. Add in the fact that Harry had been as busy as he was; constantly training and reading; and the place had been left grossly unfinished. It was only now, months later and after a good time away, that Harry realized it.

The few pieces he did have adorning the walls, or occupying shelves, were the few landscapes and knick knacks he had taken from his family vault. It wasn't much, and Harry concentrated them in the main large room, but at least it was a start. Now though, with one house guest already present, and another dozen visiting in another week, Harry was excited about finishing his place off.

There were also a few necessary items that Harry needed to get, like his new exercise equipment, food, and not to mention a Christmas tree. That perhaps was what Harry was most excited about. He'd never before had the opportunity to help buy a tree, much less decorate one. The Dursleys had always used the same artificial tree and the same boring ornaments; which Dudley had made years ago in primary school. Harry remembered vividly the time he tried to place his own ornament on the fake tree, and his uncle had laughed at him,

right after throwing it out the window. It didn't matter to the Dursleys that Harry's ornament was better made than Dudley's was; it only mattered that it had been "contaminated" by Harry, and was therefore unworthy. After that, Harry was banned from coming within five feet of the pitiful tree, not that he had anything to contribute to it.

So it was with great excitement that Harry finished his mental list of what needed to be bought, and waited the hour after that for Neville to get ready. You can imagine his frustration then, when Neville exited his room, dressed in what Harry thought to be perhaps the oddest combination of muggle clothes he'd ever seen.

"What the hell are you wearing, Neville?" Not even Harry was sure. The red leg warmers were recognizable, but not the stretchy spandex material his pants were made of. Neville was also wearing galoshes, a sequenced shirt, suspenders with "flare" on them, and a fluro baseball cap that was tilted to the side. It was a good thing Dobby wasn't around, because even he would have laughed at Neville's attire.

"What?" Neville defended himself loudly. "This is one of my best muggle outfits. Gran and her friends helped piece it together."

"Purebloods," Harry muttered under his breath. He'd seen some bad wardrobe choice a few years ago at the Quidditch World Cup, and now he understood why. It was amazing, really, that the muggle world continued to be ignorant of the magical one. With people walking around dressed as Neville was, it was truly a wonder.

"Neville, do you honestly think what you're wearing goes together? All the different colors and materials?"

Neville bristled a little. "Well, no, not really. But what do I know about muggle fashion? I'm told this is all very popular, and it's what I got."

""You don't see me wearing clothes like that, do you?" Harry vented. "And I wear normal, muggle clothes all the time under my robes and in the common room. What do you wear under your robes normally?"

"Just a shirt and trousers, I guess," Neville answered. "Sometimes just shorts, if it's hot."

"Well then, just put those on. You can borrow some of mine if you want. But for Merlin's sake, leave those clothes out so Dobby can burn them later. Once we walk around some today, you'll see just how odd you would have appeared."

Throwing his hands up in annoyance, Neville stomped back to his room. His voice carried in the large hallway though, and Harry could make out, "OK, OK, no need to get tetchy!"

Neville's second attempt at dressing himself was much improved, and for that Harry was thankful. He had no desire to dress his friend on their first outing together, and was pleased that the clothes Neville normally wore when not wearing robes, while technically wizard garments, could pass easily enough for muggle.

His pants were a dark blue, and the fact that they were spelled together, and didn't have a zipper or buttons was well hidden. Likewise, his simple shirt and jumper were commonplace, even if the slogan "Weird Sisters Rock!" might get a few puzzled looks.

And so after only that momentary delay, Harry and Neville called the lift and took the ride down to the lobby. Harry hadn't been in it since the building had opened, but was glad to see that nobody gave him a second look.

Once on the street, the two walked the short block to the tube entrance, while Harry explained about the intricate train system that ran under the city. Compared to other wizards Harry had known, Neville was almost completely muggle ignorant, and at first didn't believe Harry's claims. Only once Harry compared it to the tunnel system under Gringotts, did Neville grasp the concept, and relax some. He was still worried about the forthcoming ride (he got sick on the Gringott's cart rides), but was pleasantly relieved with the large and comfortable train compartment. The fact that they traveled much slower, and Neville could follow their progress on a lighted map, made Neville feel even better.

It was only two stops till Charing Cross Road, and within minutes Harry and Neville were back on the street. Because Harry was familiar with the shops in the area, he had decided that morning to travel to Diagon Alley, and work their way back to his apartment building. It was a two kilometer walk, but with all the shops and side streets, it could very well be a full day's experience.

Having the exterior of the Leaky Cauldron pointed out to him, Neville felt more comfortable about where they were. Up until then, he'd just been blindly following Harry, really not knowing where he was. Now though, in case he got lost or separated, at least he could find his way back to familiar ground.

The first stop they made, oddly enough, was the small bookstore right next to the Leaky Cauldron. It was time for Harry to stock up on cheap muggle paperbacks again, and he found plenty in the discount bin. Neville knew Harry was reading a lot lately, so didn't even question the purchases. He was too busy browsing the home gardening section, and was thrilled with the huge selection of books he'd never before heard of.

None of them were about magical plants, of course, but to Neville that didn't matter. Not all of the species in the Hogwarts' greenhouses were magical, as even the wizarding world used common plants like sage, rosemary, and some citruses in select potions. He never realized though how extensive and colorful some other muggle varieties could get, and Harry was more than happy to purchase two books for Neville. At first Neville had complained, but Harry squelched the argument easily saying later in the week they'd visit Diagon Alley, and Neville could pay him back. Not finding another valid argument against it, Neville conceded to let Harry pay for him.

Moving along, the two settled in for a long day of shopping and sight seeing, and both were having fun.

Neville got treated to his first muggle haircut, at the same place Harry had gone to earlier that summer, but decided not to have his head shaved. He had forgotten to get Lavender or one of the other girls to trim his head before he left, and he was afraid after three weeks, he'd be a horrid mess. Harry said he'd give it a shot if Neville trusted him,

and wasn't surprised when Neville politely refused. Harry also suggested that he could wait until Boxing Day when Mrs. Weasley and Ginny would visit, as both of them had plenty experience cutting hair. Neville wanted to look good for their visit though, so he braved the barbaric muggle ritual of scissors. In the end, his hair was stylish enough for even Pavarti to notice, and Neville picked up a bottle of hair gel as well. Much better smelling then Sleekeasy's hair potions.

At the sporting goods store; their next stop; Harry went right to the counter, and placed an order for the best equipment they had. In place of the two machines and free weights Harry had donated to Gryffindor, this time he was getting four machines, all electric and top-of-the-line, and the deluxe set of free weights. The clerk was suspicious of Harry's quick order until he showed his credit card, but after that, things ran much smoother. And because the equipment cost over eight thousand pounds, and was such a huge order, the clerk guaranteed delivery the next afternoon. The charge he knew was large enough to draw Dumbledore's attention, but the shop was close enough to Diagon Alley that Harry didn't think it would matter. It's not like Dumbledore would think that his Hideaway was equally as close. And admittedly, Harry found a guilty sort of pleasure in the fact that he'd be flaunting his freedom in Dumbledore's face, and there wasn't a single thing the old man could do about it.

Neville had been standing by during the transaction, but was paying more attention to all the other sports equipment around. In the wizarding world there was mainly just Quidditch, with small gatherings of Quadpot and a few older sports. But here in this muggle store, dozens of sports were advertised and showcased, and Neville couldn't get enough. There were also a half dozen in-house tellys playing a looping tape of a bunch of different sports, and Neville was gobsmacked.

"Harry," he whispered, "how do they have pictures moving in those black boxes. I thought only wizard pictures moved like that?"

While the clerk ran Harry's credit card, and approved the delivery address (another flat building three blocks away from his own, that he'd picked out ahead of time), Harry had time to explain.

"Those aren't pictures Neville; at least not like you think of them. Those are all tellys, like the one I have back at my place. They're playing a looped recording of images and sound, only you can't hear anything because they've got the volume muted. If you can wait until tonight, I'll try to explain better. Just watch and enjoy yourself for now. You know the sport Dean's always going on about, football? Well, that telly in the corner is playing a game. How about I meet you over there in a few minutes?"

Neville didn't need to be asked twice, and nearly skipped over to the corner telly. From the team's colors it looked like it was a Manchester United game, not West Ham, but Harry didn't think Neville would know the difference.

At the department store that Harry had shopped, he stopped in to see if perhaps Becky was still working there; the nice girl who'd helped him buy his wardrobe. She wasn't, but her rude uncle was, and Harry guided Neville out the door before they could be approached. Around the corner at the shoe department Harry asked another attendant if Becky was still employed, and found that she'd be home for vacation herself in another two days, and would work the weeks before and after Christmas. Harry didn't need any new clothes right away, and Neville didn't either, so Harry promised to come back later. Becky had been very nice and helpful, and Harry wanted to make sure she got his commission if he could help it.

Across the street from the menswear store was an art gallery, and that was their next stop. Neville helped Harry pick out some nice pieces for his walls, and the day continued much in the same manner. Harry had early on ducked into an alleyway to magically expand a shopping bag, and that way they didn't have to carry huge packages or odd shaped parcels. Neville was frightened when Harry had pulled his wand, but Harry told him that the Ministry couldn't track his magic anymore, and that he'd explain later.

They stopped for lunch at the same fish and chips stand, and Neville enjoyed the treat just as much as Harry always had. There was just something about huge battered chunks of fish drowned in vinegar that always left Harry's mouth watering, and he was glad for the chance to quench his craving.

After lunch they popped into some specialty shops to finish off their Christmas shopping, and the last stop they made was to purchase a Christmas tree and ornaments. There was an empty lot two blocks north of the main drag with a small storefront for the decorations, and Harry wasted no time going right for the largest and fullest tree he could find.

"This is the one I want! What do you think, Neville? How's this one?"

"Er, great Harry, but how are you going to get it back to your place? I think someone would notice you stuffing a twelve foot tree in your bag."

"Hmmm," Harry thought, "that is a problem, but I'm sure I can think of something. I know!" Looking around carefully, making sure no one was in direct sight, Harry quietly called out, "Dobby!"

Pop! "Yes Mr. Harry Potter sir? You called for Dobby?"

"Shhhh, not so loud Dobby; there's muggles around. I need you to take this tree back with you to the Hideaway, and I'll explain later. First I need to pay for it and pick up some ornaments. Put it in place of one of the sofas in the living room area, alright? We can position it later when we get back."

"Yes sir, Dobby be doing that right away." Placing his hand against the tree trunk, Dobby snapped his fingers, and both elf and tree disappeared in a small puff of smoke.

"Now all we need to get is the tree stand and ornaments," Harry smiled.

"Hey you two, what happened to that tree you were looking at?" Both Harry and Neville turned around nervously to see the lot manger approach them, but he had just come out from behind a large group of firs. It was obvious he had only heard them talking to someone, not seen the tree disappear into thin air, and for that Harry was thankful.

"Sorry sir, we just helped our friend load the tree onto our car. We pay for it inside, right?" Pretending nothing was wrong seemed the best way to act, and Harry wasn't disappointed.

"Yeah, just be sure to let someone know next time before taking a tree off the premises. We're supposed to load the trees ourselves, and could get in a lot of trouble if one of you got hurt. Plus, I don't remember which exact tree you were looking at. That could be a problem."

"Oh," Harry said, realizing what the man meant, "that's easy. We took the good looking twelve footer. It was the best tree you had, so don't worry about us not paying for it. We don't want to cheat you out of anything. We just wanted to get it loaded before someone else came by. I still need to pick out loads of ornaments."

The man looked confused that Harry had admitted to buying the best tree when he could have played dumb and said he'd only taken a six footer, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Ok then, tell Susan inside the tree's price is two hundred. I think they're having a sale on ornaments too, so if you buy more than twenty, the purchase is ten percent off. Thanks for shopping with us."

Both thanked the man themselves, and quickly made their way into the store. Once inside the small shop, it was Neville's turn to feel at home. For the first time in London, he had more experience than Harry had.

"So Neville," Harry asked, "do you have any idea how many ornaments we'll need, or what to get for a tree that size? I'm clueless really." What made the feeling worse, was that although the shop was small, the selection was huge. Their must have been over a thousand different designs and colors, and Harry didn't know where to begin

"Well," Neville considered, "for a tree that size, I think you'll need at least a hundred. These ornaments don't look much different than wizarding ones, except they don't glow or do anything really. The same size though. It would be safe the buy some extra though. They're real fragile, and a few always break. If you can use magic without the Ministry knowing about it, maybe you could even animate

or charm all these, to make them more interesting? They don't have fairies here either, so I don't know what you'll have to do about lights."

"That's a good idea about charming the ornaments, Neville. You could help too, once I place an anti-detection spell on you. Don't ask; it's better if you don't know. I just hope Mr. Weasley doesn't report us when he comes to visit. The lights are taken care of though," Harry said, pointing over to the Christmas light section. Like with the ornaments, there were tons of choices. This time though, Harry knew what he wanted. The Dursleys had always been cheap when it came to buying lights (no doubt to save money for Dudley's many gifts), and had always bought the single circuit kind. Only problem was, when one of the small lights burnt out, the whole chain went dark. And somehow, it was always Harry who was made to unscrew and test every tiny bulb. Too many years of that made Harry sure he wanted the sturdy double circuit strands, and of those there weren't that many varieties. And seeing as he didn't want lights shaped like chili peppers, Tabasco bottles, or bananas, Harry chose a few strands of the normal looking bulbs. Some blinked, some flashed, but all of them matched, and were fine for Harry.

The ornaments were more problematic, and after ten minutes trying to decide on a theme unsuccessfully, Harry just handed a basket to Neville and told him to grab seventy that looked interesting. He did the same, and when Harry finally talked with Susan at the desk about paying for his purchases, Harry didn't know what half of the stuff was. Hopefully, Neville had made some good choices.

It was the middle of the afternoon after they finished their shopping; stopping at a few more stores once done with the tree supplies. Harry wanted to get home before dark, as he still had a few more things to do. He also wanted the time to show Neville the telly, as he knew it would keep the other boy occupied once he explained the basic premise. Talking with Dobby would take awhile, as would planning the next few days, and Harry didn't want to leave Neville on his own in a strange environment for too long.

Once they got back (and Neville had no problem accessing the place now that he knew the secret), Dobby and Winky rushed in to take their bags and offer them some hot cocoa. It had gotten much chillier

in the afternoon, and each boy's light jacket and thick jumper just barely managed to keep them warm the last few hours. Dobby must have noticed them shivering when he picked up the tree, and Harry appreciated the cocoa almost as much as the sentiment.

Winky was a little shy around them; this being the first time she'd seen either since her breakdown the night before; but managed to hold herself together fine. Remembering what Harry asked, Neville even managed to pull her aside for a little talk, and after that she seemed more relaxed. Even a bit grateful, really.

"Winky's finally going to show me how that telly thing works tonight," Neville informed Harry when he returned from his talk. "She said we could even eat in front of it, on something called 'TV trays.' I know there was some other stuff you wanted to get done, so I thought I'd get out of your hair for the rest of the night. Maybe tomorrow we could decorate the tree? You've still got some explaining to do, also. Like all the magic you've been doing. It can wait another day, though."

Harry looked relieved, as yet again the elves saved him from blowing off Neville. "Thanks Neville, that will help loads! I promise to bring you up to speed tomorrow. I'll be gone in the morning, but when I get back for lunch, we'll have that talk. I've got some important errands to run, and the sooner they get done the better."

Neville nodded, and after putting away his things, followed Winky into the muggle room, who was levitating their dinner of meatloaf, potatoes, asparagus, and a pudding behind her. Harry and Dobby had the same for dinner, but ate at the kitchen table, where they were left alone to do some talking.

As they ate, Dobby informed Harry of all he'd been doing in Sirirus's vault the past few weeks. Telling Griphook to allow Dobby access had been a stroke of genius, because by the sound of things, Harry would never had been able to get all the work done himself in the time allotted.

The first thing Dobby had done was transfer all the piles of galleons, sickles, and knuts to the Potter family vault. Once it was transferred, Harry couldn't withdraw it again until his next birthday, but that didn't

matter. He still had access to his trust fund vault, and there was plenty of money left in there for at least a decade of extravagant living.

The transfer of funds had proved a purpose though. Since his original plan of using vault 833B to sort Sirius's contents was now bunk (because he was using it to store his seized Death Eaters funds), getting rid of the money provided valuable extra space in the already cramped vault to go through the Blacks' assets.

Like the Potter vault, Dobby informed Harry that there was a large assortment of artwork, weaponry, magical objects, and paperwork housed there. So far Dobby had merely been taking invoice of everything, and sorting it all into piles.

The sizeable pile of artwork was expected, and Harry was pleased to hear that some of it might not only be useful, but also valuable. Unlike what Harry had feared, Dobby told him most of the artwork was landscapes and decorative pieces, and that mosy of the few portraits he'd seen weren't anything like the one of Mrs. Black. Harry just assumed that all of the Blacks' stuff would reek of the dark arts and Slytherin house, but apparently that wasn't so. More likely, Harry decided after hearing a descriptive list from Dobby, the Blacks had stored everything in their vault they didn't deem "worthy" of their ancient and noble house. So really, all the dark objects and evil paintings were already in use at Grimmauld place, and most had been thrown out due to Mrs. Weasley's summer cleaning fits.

The weapons Dobby didn't know about, as he didn't have enough magical knowledge to interpret the colored glows that radiated off most of the metals. Like in the Potter vault, there were a wide assortment of blades and armor, and Harry only guessed it must be something that every Pureblood family had. 'Probably dates back to hundreds of years ago,' Harry thought. He asked Neville about it later, and Neville confirmed it so. Every pureblood family that dated back to the Middle Ages had extensive weaponry and armament collections.

Sorting the random magical items was more time consuming, as Dobby had to be careful of any unknown objects. There were the standard foe glasses, sneakoscopes, and long forgotten school items that Harry had expected, and all those were put into what Doby called

his "harmless pile." He'd also made a pile though of suspect items that were unfamiliar, or looked suspicious. Then of course there was the small "evil" pile, which Dobby had been extra careful about. Dobby hadn't even touched any of those, instead resorting to moving them by levitation. His inventory included a list of what he could recognize, and Harry himself matched some of the descriptions with what he'd seen in the secret basement room of Borkin & Burkes. If the objects were so illegal that they needed to be kept down there instead of the shop's normal shelves, then Harry was sure he'd be dealing with some nasty artifacts.

There weren't any books in the Black vault like in his own, but there were some ancients scrolls Dobby said. He'd only had time to count and move them aside, but he guessed that they were valuable to be held in a vault, instead of being part of a library collection.

There was plenty of paperwork though, and that's what had taken most of Dobby's time. He'd had to sort through the crates of parchment to find building leases, business contracts, birth and death records, and tons of stuff he didn't even recognize. Dobby tried to pull out anything that looked like it either required immediate attention or was coming up for renewal soon, but admitted to not having the experience needed to truly know what he was doing. He mainly had looked for dates of renewal and expirations, but even that Harry was impressed with. He made sure to tell that to Dobby too. When he assigned him this task, Harry only expected Dobby to sort everything into piles, and perhaps do a light inventory. He'd never expected the small house-elf to try to make sense of the many legal documents, let alone do a satisfactory job of it.

And of course, Dobby had scrubbed the whole vault from floor to ceiling more times than it needed. Dobby took pride in his house-elf duties, and Harry had no doubt the Black family vault was now the cleanest vault in all of Gringotts.

"Mr. Reemy also had be asking Dobby to find for him a small container. Mr. Reemy said he be needing it for special project, and Dobby not think that Mr. Harry Potter sir be minding. Mr. Reemy is good friend and wizard, Dobby knows. Dobby is hoping that Mr. Harry Potter sir is not being mad at Dobby."

Harry frowned. Not that he was upset with Dobby, but he was wondering what Remus had taken from Sirius's vault. And more importantly, why hadn't Remus mentioned it before? Was he taking something that he feared Harry might want for himself? Or was it perhaps a personal object that Sirius had held for him? Harry knew that Remus didn't have a Gringott's vault himself (due to his lack of a steady job, and the need to travel, Remus preferred to use muggle banks), so it stood to reason that Sirius might have held some of Moony's more valuable possessions.

"No, that's fine Dobby, I don't mind. It's just surprising. When did Remus ask you for this container, and when did you give it to him?"

"Mr. Reemy be asking right as soon as Dobby be visiting the vault, sir. And Dobby be finding the container right away. It was being put in special place, and was easy to find. Dobby gave it to Mr. Reemy weeks ago, Mr. Harry Potter sir."

Knowing he wouldn't be getting more answers out of Dobby, Harry tabled his questions for now. He knew he'd have to ask Remus, and that wouldn't happen for a few more days. The next full moon was only two days away, and Remus had said he'd be holed up in his home until he felt better. He'd still be healed and rested though to spend the days surrounding Christmas at the Hideaway with Harry and Neville, and Harry could wait to find out about the small container till then.

Dinner long over by now, Harry finished his talk with Dobby, who left the table to clean. Harry had some letters he wanted to write and get away before he turned in for the night, and retired to the library to write them. Dobby must have laid out supplies at some point, because awaiting him on the large study table was fresh parchment, quills, and an inkpot.

The first letter Harry wrote was an apology to Professor McGonagall. He didn't follow Luna's suggestions of sending her flowers, but he did express a heartfelt apology about their confrontation. In his letter, Harry explained that it was wrong of her to be placed in the middle of his and Professor Dumbledore's personal disagreement, and he

explained that he'd not only be writing, but visiting with the Headmaster soon to address the problem. Hopefully by the time classes resumed, the tension would either be solved or at least lightened some, and she wouldn't be placed in an awkward situation again.

His second letter was to the squib real estate agent he'd chosen from the Squib Services catalogues. Harry had written a perfunctory letter when he first chose the agent, a woman by the name of Shelly Autumn. She had written back saying she'd be delighted to represent a property of his, and had no problem with the unique security measures that might have to be dealt with. She also included a contract of confidentiality, so Harry was confident that she wouldn't leak news to either Dumbledore or the media.

Harry wrote requesting a meeting the twenty seventh of December, and informed her of the general location of the house. He knew he couldn't give away specifics because of the Fidelius Charm, but had given her an address six miles north of Camden Town, which would place her in the vicinity of Grimmauld Place. She knew it wasn't an exact address, and Harry politely requested that she wait for him to collect her at one in the afternoon.

Speaking of the Fidelius Charm, that was one of the main reasons why Harry had to compose a letter to Professor Dumbledore. And after his recent order given to McGonagall to prevent him from leaving Hogwarts for the holidays, it took Harry three drafts to manage a letter that wasn't completely spiteful.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

You're no doubt surprised and upset that I managed to leave Hogwarts without your approval, but consider the fact that I was just as surprised and angry to learn of your restriction. I had thought we were past the point of you making life decisions on my behalf when you have no right, let alone not even inform me about them. I realize we still disagree on many things, but I didn't think you'd resort to sending Professor McGonagall to enforce your unjust decision. And believe me, I think it surprised Professor McGonagall as well. If you

think that sending her to enforce your rule was a good idea, you've made yet another error in judgment. Now I'm upset with you once more, and I think Professor McGonagall doesn't feel too happy about the situation either. Placing her in the awkward position to try to force me off the train (to the point that we actually drew our wands!) was wrong, and now it's stressed our relationship past a point I'm comfortable with.

I've already sent a letter to Professor McGonagall asking her to forgive me for the actions I had to take, and I suggest you do the same. In my opinion you have a lot more to apologize for than me, as you knew perfectly well what my reaction to being told to stay at Hogwarts would be. And please don't plead ignorance that you didn't know of my intentions to leave for the holidays, as it's insulting to both our intelligences. I never signed up for the list to stay, and I've made it no secret that I was excited about leaving for the first time.

Which brings me to another point I'd like to discuss. I also don't think you haven't heard of my plans to invite the Weasleys and Grangers to my home the day after Christmas, and I can only imagine the plans you've concocted to either prevent that from happening, or perhaps even capture me. I still haven't forgotten Snape, Tonks, and Moody under those invisibility cloaks you sent after me last summer, and I'm warning you not to attempt anything similar.

I'm perfectly capable of ensuring my own safety, and I should be able to have house guests as I see fit. I was even considering inviting you for the day, to show you the pains I've gone through in protecting myself, but I'm afraid your recent actions have changed my mind. Perhaps some other time, if you stop playing your games. So I will be escorting the Weasleys and the Grangers to my home, and I request that you don't interfere with my plans. I guarantee if you in any way do, I will still manage to return home alone, and you can forget out any further contact between us outside of Hogwarts. I'd also think that my friends, Mrs. Weasley in particular, will be upset if you force me to remain in isolation for the remainder of the holidays. If you still don't trust my word though, you can at least take comfort that Remus, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Fred and George will all be in attendance. They're all fully-trained capable "adults," and I'd think that would appease you somewhat.

On another matter, if you'd like to talk, I will be at Grimmauld Place the twenty seventh of December, at noon. As discussed I've looked into selling the place, and have already contacted a real estate agent to make the necessary changes and broker the sale. Feel free to have the Order continue to use it until then, but I'd like the place emptied of any of your belongings by the time I show up. I have no idea how soon the place can be sold, but I'd like to get rid of it as soon as possible. It was never a loved home by Sirius or myself, and I see no reason to keep it. I'm sure you're also capable of providing another place for the Order to meet. If not, perhaps you can use some of that money from Sirius's pardon that you "allocated" to the Order.

And of course, you'll have to remove the Fidelius Charm and any other protective spells or wards that you've placed prior to my arrival that day. It wouldn't do well to show up with a real estate agent who couldn't find herself inside, and I know that you have to break that charm yourself. Any spells that the Blacks originally placed on the house can be broken by the subcontractors that will be hired, but I doubt any of them could break your personal wards.

You'll be unable to return a letter to me in reply, so please just be at Grimalud Place next week if you wish to talk. I sincerely hope you take this letter seriously, as I've just about had enough of your manipulations. Oh, and have a happy Christmas.

Harry Potter

Harry blew on the ink and waited for it to dry before rolling the parchment and sealing it with some wax. When he was done, Hedwig was waiting on his shoulder for the assignment of delivering the letters. It had been a long time since she had delivered something out of Hogwarts (not counting the trip to South America), and she was thrilled at the chance to make not one, but multiple deliveries. Knowing that she'd have some fun, Harry even told her to take the next day off, and fly instead of teleport. That way she could stretch her wings if she liked, and perhaps do some fishing on the long trip to Scotland. Harry was confident that he could survive one day without

her looking over his shoulder, and had to promise not to do anything dangerous or exciting before she agreed.

The next morning Harry set out early for Diagon Alley, taking Dobby with him. He had many things to accomplish, and he wanted to get back for lunch as quickly as possible, so he could spend the remainder of the day with Neville having fun. Dobby was needed for the visit to Sirius's vault, but was still moved to tears that Harry had considered asking him to accompany him, instead of ordering so.

Like his previous trips, his first stop was Gringotts. But as he entered the building, it was also like his previous trips. He was in disguise! The four Death Eaters he'd caught in November, and had a chance to interrogate before leaving Hogwarts for vacation, he'd yet to empty their vaults like the others. Knowing that Voldemort had noticed their absence much sooner than the ones before them, Harry wanted to get it done with much earlier. He was out of Polyjuice Potion however, and had had to wait the two weeks for it to finish brewing. Even by transporting the potion with him back in time twice, the vile concoction was only finished just the day before Harry boarded the Hogwarts Express.

Luckily, Harry didn't have any problems with transferring all their accounts to the one in vault 833B. It was a different goblin manager he'd seen, but this one didn't show the amount of shock as the last had. No doubt, he'd been informed of the transactions after that very profitable day.

Only having to make three visits this time (the married couple shared all their accounts), Harry made short work of drinking each potion, and doing what he came to do. When he was done, he wondered Knockturn Alley in a dark hooded cloak until the last potion had worn off. When it did, no one was paying enough attention to notice the slight change under his heavy cloak. Harry'd saved a similar sized man for his last transfiguration on purpose.

With that done, Harry went back to Gringotts, this time entering as himself. Dobby met him at the doors, as he'd been wondering the streets by himself earlier. He'd never had a master before grant him that freedom, and Harry could tell Dobby had got a lot of mileage

because of all the house-elf sized handprints on the glass on the nearby shops.

Harry only had some short business to conduct at the counters (Neville had authorized him to withdraw and convert some money into muggle currency), and had to wait in line as the bank was now busy. With his hood still up, no one noticed him, even with a house-elf in tow, which was just fine with Harry. When it was time to make the exchange however, he had to lift his hood and state his name, and that drew some attention. The transaction didn't take long though, and soon enough Harry was making his way to the mine carts for the long ride down to Sirius's vault.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. Good morning, Dobby. Please step inside and we'll be on our way."

This time, Harry had no difficulties recognizing Griphook. It amazed Harry that he once again had appeared to escort Harry to his vaults, but Harry figured he must have been alerted when people started to recognize him in the lobby.

"Hello Griphook," Harry returned warmly. "I didn't think your duties included escorting people in the carts anymore."

"They don't sir, normally. But if you'll remember, I'm still under certain obligations to accompany you whenever you visit your vaults. And while those directions do not encompass your desire to visit the Black family vault, I thought it best to do so anyway. The arrangements we've made regarding your new vaults, and granting Dobby unrestricted access to your own, haven't been shared with anyone outside of my direct superiors. I thought you might not appreciate another party being unnecessarily informed."

Harry thanked Griphook for the forethought, but wasn't sure if the goblin heard him or not. That was because the mine cart ride had already started, and Dobby had his hands in the air, his bat-like ears flapping in the breeze, screaming his bloody head off!

"WEEE! This is being so much fun. WEEE!"

Harry tried asking Dobby to quiet down, but was unable to over the noise. Harry could have sworn he saw Griphook snicker at the attempt, but it was hard to say for sure with the goblin's back to him.

It wasn't until they passed the security dragons, and one shot a blast of fire over the cart's top, that Dobby yelped in fear, and quit screaming. Frankly, Harry thought he and Griphook had more reason to be afraid. If the dragon attacked the cart, they'd be the ones it would go after. Dobby's small size would only make him seem like a piece of floss lost in the dragon's enormous teeth. Still, they passed by the first dragon without further incident, and Dobby remained relatively quiet for the remainder of the trip.

"What the hell was that all about, Dobby?" Harry asked once they came to a complete stop. Griphook was busy moving the lantern and opening the vault doors, and again Harry thought he might be laughing.

"Dobby is being so sorry, Mr. Harry Potter sir, but Dobby has never had so much fun before. Dobby did not like the bad dragonseys, but the ride was being a screaming good time!"

"But you've been down here loads of times before, Dobby. Surely you must be used to the mine carts by now?"

"Begging your pardon, sir," Griphook interrupted them. "But that's untrue. Being a highly magical being himself, and not being subject to the wards protecting our vaults from wizarding magic, Dobby has in the past been able to appear directly into your vaults without having to use our tunnel system for access. Although I fear that might not be the case in the future, after I accompanied him the first time as per your instructions, Dobby's had free access to your vaults this whole time. I believe today was his first cart ride. And as I'm sure you'll agree, I think he rather like it."

"What gave you that idea?" Harry asked sarcastically. Still, it made sense. Dobby didn't apparate as wizards did, so it would stand to reason he could just "pop" in and out of the vaults when he wished.

Once Dobby had calmed down from the exhilarating ride, he and Harry got to work sifting through the piles of stuff. It wasn't much work, really, as Harry had already decided what he planned to do with each. Thanks to what Dobby had already accomplished, and his knowledge of where he had put everything, Harry spent less than an hour in the vault.

The weapons and dark objects he left alone, not knowing what to do with them for the moment. All the other magical items Harry packed away in an enlarged bag though. Like in his own vault, among the paperwork was a list of every item and instructions on how to use the more rare ones. That took some time to find, but Griphook didn't mind lending a hand, as he had nothing better to do. Actually, he was pleased to help, as wizards rarely trusted goblins enough to rifle through their possessions.

Harry took the bulk of the artwork too. All the landscapes and sculptures got packed immediately, and Harry decided on two portraits that he had short conversations with. He wanted to make sure his home stayed secure, so he politely asked the portraits who they were, and where else they had portraits of themselves.

The male portrait Harry selected was of Sirius's uncle; the one Harry had heard about who had left Sirius some money. Apparently he had been the other "white sheep" in the Black family, and was relieved at the chance to be hung on a wall again. Questioning who Harry was, or why he had access to the Black family vault didn't even cross the man's mind. As he was most agreeable, and didn't have another copy of a portrait anywhere, Harry foresaw no problems in hanging him on the walls of his Hideaway.

Aileen Lindsay was the other portrait Harry chose, for the sole reason her case was an interesting one. She didn't know anything about how she became a portrait, how she ended up where she was, or what happened to her real self. The woman didn't even know who the Blacks were! You see, Aileen was a muggle, and hadn't remembered ever being outside of the vault. The first few years, she was understandably confused, but over time some of the other stored portraits had filled her in on the world of magic, and what she had become. Still, it was roughly fifty years since her appearance, and

Harry took her if only for the simple fact she'd never been out of the vault, and he looked forward to trying to solve her mystery. And like Sirius's uncle, she too didn't have a duplicate portrait (as far as she knew), so didn't present a security risk. Briefly, Harry wondered if the real Aileen Lindsay could still be alive.

Harry also packed away the "questionable items" Dobby had tagged, although those were handled with more care. Harry knew he could go through them at his leisure, and decide if each object was worth keeping. He probably wouldn't have time during the holidays to go through each one, but he could bring the rest to school with him, and finish at Hogwarts as time allowed.

Dobby promised to find his own way back home (he wanted to stay to do some more cataloging of paperwork), so when Harry was finished, he traveled back to the lobby with Griphook, and made his way to the public floo at the Leaky Cauldron. Harry could apparate of course, but it was illegal for him to without a proper license, so he couldn't in public when so many people had seen him already. Harry didn't mind waiting in line though. He got to trade a few pleasantries with Tom while he waited, and when his turn came to use the floo, he was able to speak his destination quietly enough so nobody overheard. Harry wasn't clear on exactly how strict he had to be when telling others the location of his charmed home, and thought it best that people not overhear him, just in case.

Stepping out of the large fireplace, Harry's nose immediately caught a wiff of the delicious smell coming from the kitchen. Winky was busily hurrying back and forth between the stovetop and table, and it looked like he was just in time for lunch.

"How was your morning, Winky? You keep Neville entertained alright?"

"Mr. Nev is still watching the telly, Mr. Harry Potter sir! Mr. Nev hasn't left the muggle room since last night sir. Winky not even be knowing if Nev has been to sleep yet."

"What!?!?" Harry couldn't help it; he burst out laughing. He knew that television could be addicting (Winky had gone through a small

addiction to cooking shows herself), but it was almost twenty hours after Neville had been introduced to the accursed black box. He couldn't still be watching, could he?

"I is trying to get him to take a break, Mr. Harry Potter sir, but Mr. Nev is not be listening to Winky!" Winky looked like she had actually washed her hands of the situation. "Mr. Nev wants to be a couch potatoie and watch the telly all day, and Winky has tried to turn it off, but Nev not be letting Winky. Winky has not even cleaned the muggle room today! Mr. Nev cannot be doing this much longer!"

"Oh no!" Harry thought. "Neville's keeping Winky from cleaning. Now he's in trouble."

Still, he had to comfort the small elf, and he knew realistically Neville couldn't spend much more time in there. They still had the entire afternoon together, and Harry wanted to at least trim the Christmas tree and explain about his magic use before the day was through. The explaining wouldn't take long, but Harry had no idea how to even begin with the tree. It could take hours for as much as he knew, especially considering that the lights and ornaments were muggle, and had to be placed by hand.

"I promise I'll get Neville out of the muggle room, Winky. Lunch is almost ready, right? Well, I'll make Neville come eat it at the table here. We'll also be busy for the whole afternoon, so you can either help us decorate the tree, or use the time to clean the muggle room. Whatever you like."

Winky was pleased with Harry's promise, and went back to cooking lunch. By the smell and look of things, it was some sort of seafood bisque, with skewered grilled prawns and homemade crusty bread. Harry couldn't wait!

In the end it took ten minutes to drag Neville away form the telly. Apparently he'd been so enthralled after Winky had shown him the night before, that he'd spent three hours watching cooking shows before he managed to discover that there was more than one channel. One being just more exciting then the next, Neville had been up until the early hours of the morning before he came across the real

revelation. You see, Harry had hacked into a neighbor's cable signal in the late part of summer, once people had started to move into the building, and therefore had over a hundred channels. Harry should have known to just tell Neville from the get go about the gardening one.

"They're the most wonderful things I've ever seen, Harry!" Neville exclaimed the praises of the shows he'd been watching since then. That's what he'd been watching the entire day. Gardening tips and suggestions from around the world, in every possible climate, and addressing every type of problem imaginable! None of it was about magical strains, but Neville hardly noticed. It was only when Harry promised the shows would still be on later, that Neville agreed to come away from the telly. He still must not have understood that cable channels ran almost twenty four hours a day.

After lunch, the two agreed to give the telly a break, and trim the tree. It was still leaning in a corner where Dobby had left it lying, and all the ornaments and lights were still in the shopping bags. Harry had no idea where to begin (he saw Professor Flictwick decorate a tree once at school, but hadn't been paying attention at the time), but luckily Neville did. He and his Gran did two things every year for Christmas, he told Harry. One, they trimmed a tree together, and two, they visited his parents at St. Mungo's. Harry remembered seeing Neville there the year before when he went to visit Mr. Weasley, and privately made a note to himself not to make any plans for Christmas day. It meant a lot to Neville, so Harry would have to make sure to fit in a visit to St. Mungo's for him.

Getting the tree in the stand wasn't too hard, with a little help from Harry's wand. He managed to levitate the tree while Neville fastened the device, and doing so reminded him to explain to Neville that he had found a spell to lift the Ministry tracking charm placed on them all. Once the tree was in place (it was in the corner of the room, opposite the kitchen), Harry repeated the spell on Neville so he too could use magic freely over the holidays. It was a good thing Harry remembered the incantation and triangular wand movements that Burkes had used on him all those months ago. Of course, whatever potion Dumbledore slipped in the Welcoming Feast drinks would still be active, but somehow Harry wasn't worried. If Dumbledore wanted to call Harry

and Neville out on illegal underage magic use, he wouldn't have the Ministry to collaborate evidence. And Harry also knew it wasn't public knowledge that Dumbledore didn't trust the Ministry, and used his own form of tracking. If that came to light, Harry was sure there'd be some upset parents who wouldn't approve of strange potions given to their children without any kind of permission. No, Harry wasn't too concerned about Dumbledore finding out.

Once Neville could use his wand too, the trimming went much faster. All the ornaments were levitated into place, and Dobby had shown up by then to help out. Winky coordinated the effort from her seat on the sofa to make sure the tree was evenly decorated, although Harry let her place the star on the top of the tree when they were all done.

The two were so lost in their work, that Harry nearly forgot to meet the delivery men with his new workout equipment. He apparated to the address with three minutes to spare though, and like always, they were almost a half hour late. But once the equipment was delivered (Harry had picked the address of an empty unit, which he temporarily spelled the door unlocked), he called on Dobby, and the two had the machines in his weight room within minutes. Then it was right back to the tree.

The lights went up effortlessly, although it had required a quick lesson in electricity for Neville. He had seen how the electric lights (and of course his telly) had worked the day before, but hadn't given it much thought. The lights peaked his interest though, and Harry had to take the time out to explain about power generators and electric bills. Harry only hoped that Neville would remember it all, so that he could tell Mr. Weasley the same later on, when he came to visit. There was no doubt in Harry's mind that he'd be asking the same questions and more.

Harry also offered to start dueling with Neville perhaps after dinner, but not surprising, Neville was too tired. They made plans for the next day though, and Neville eventually drifted off to his room much earlier than he normally would. Harry didn't mind though. He spent those few hours alone before he himself went to sleep finishing off the tree. A candy store had been among the shops the two had visited the day before, and Harry had different flavored candy canes to finish off the

tree. Harry also took the time to spell some of the more ordinary ornaments, like Neville had suggested. Some he made glow, some he made move, and some he transfigured into little brooms and snitches, but Harry must have spelled at least a quarter of all the decorations by the time he was done. Very satisfied with his work, and basking in the beauty of his first Christmas tree, Harry retired to bed after a very long day. So tired he was in fact, that for the first time since he began his training, Harry skipped his Occlumency exercises. It was a mistake he'd continue to make for the remainder of the week, and one that put into motion effects with tremendous repercussions. The next day, and in fact the remaining week until Christmas, passed in a leisurely and relaxing way for both Harry and Neville. They did manage to spend time each afternoon to increasing their dueling skills, usually spending two to three hours together in the dueling chamber or weight room, but in the mornings they managed to have some fun as well.

Neville had cut back on the telly once the programs started to repeat, and Harry thought it might be nice to take him to London's botanical gardens. Only the greenhouses were on display thanks to the cold weather, but Neville still thought the impressive exhibit was worth the long train ride.

They also returned to the clothing store where Becky worked, who was delighted to see Harry again. She was even more pleased when she heard he had waited for her to make any new purchases, and had brought Neville along as well. Neville's wardrobe of muggle clothes (or things that could pass for muggle) was limited once he got rid of all the sequenced shirts, so he spent some of his money on basic jeans, shirts, and sweaters. He need a heavy jacket too, as his cloak wouldn't do in public, and the one he had been borrowing from Harry was way too small. Neville had much broader shoulder and a stockier build than Harry, and the nice wool coat he'd chosen was a much better fit.

Neville had also been introduced to the wonderful world of arcades, on a spur of the moment idea Harry had while walking by a popular one. Harry himself had never been able to play any of Dudley's many computer games, and wanted to stop in real quick to have a look. He changed five pounds into tokens, and gave half to Neville, thinking

they'd be there perhaps an hour at most. It was actually only twenty minutes before Harry had run out of tokens, but Neville wasn't so unfortunate.

Apparently, Neville had discovered another hidden talent. Along with gardening it seemed, he also had great hand/eye coordination, which served him well as he broke a high score on one of the machines. Harry was impressed that his friend took to the games so naturally, and made no complaints about waiting around while Neville finished using his own tokens. Fortunately though, Harry had used the last of his cash, and Neville hadn't thought to bring his. They left soon after, but Harry promised Neville he could return.

And return he did. Two days before Christmas, Harry had completely used up all the art and decorations he'd bought from stores and taken from Siruis's vault, and he wanted to make another run. Neville didn't want to tag along this time though; instead he wanted to return to the arcade, alone. Harry was nervous about letting him, but realized he really didn't have a say. Neville had his own money, remembered the way, and had his wand in case of an emergency. And who was Harry to be telling Neville how to live his life? If he did that, then he'd be guilty of the same crimes he'd been accusing Dumbledore of.

Harry did make one stipulation though. Neville must carry a portkey with him, in case he got lost or ran into trouble. By that time in the vacation, Harry had let Neville in on a few more of his secrets (none of the big ones yet!), and felt comfortable with entrusting his friend with a small portkey that would transport him to his building's basement. It was illegal sure, but would make Harry feel much better about leaving Neville alone in muggle London. So he turned a small stone into a voice activated portkey, and gave it to Neville to wear around his neck on a thin leather strip. It wasn't pretty to look at, but it was only to be worn when Neville went out, and could be activated with one mention of the keyword, "Mandrake."

Harry managed to get a few more things for his home, and all the food and supplies that Winky had decided on, by the time he returned home that afternoon. Much to his surprise, he found Neville and Remus talking over a game of darts in the muggle room, not even aware that Harry had returned. Harry had to clear his throat to get

their attention, but greeted Remus warmly once he dropped his packages.

"Remus, nice to see you! When did you get in? I hope you weren't waiting alone long?"

"No Harry," he replied, "not too long ago. And Neville was already here when I arrived, so I wasn't alone at all. We've just been talking about muggle arcades. It seems Neville here has broken a few local records, and had already earned himself a small reputation. I was asking to come by and watch him maybe sometime next week, if he doesn't mind. Sirius used to go to muggle arcades and amusement parks, and he'd sometimes drag me along. I wasn't much into the rides, but the arcades were fun. I was telling Neville about bowling as well. He's never been, but he surprised me by knowing a fair deal about it.

Harry shot up an eyebrow. "Neville, you were about as muggle ignorant as any wizard I've ever met before your visit. Where'd you hear of bowling before?"

Neville's face turned a shade pinker at the statement, but he knew it was the truth. He had been muggle ignorant; not about bowling though. And funny enough, he'd learned about it from a wizard.

"Well, I don't know if you remember or not Harry, but I used to be very big into collecting chocolate frog cards. I still do, but not like I used to. Anyway, on his chocolate card Professor Dumbledore says..."

"...chamber music and ten pin bowling," Harry finished for him. "Yeah, I remember now. That was my very first chocolate frog card, you know. I think I gave it to Ron though. Actually, I think I've given him all my chocolate frog cards. So, that's how you know what bowling is then?"

"Yes," Neville nodded. "When I first came to Hogwarts, and I finally got the chance to meet Professor Dumbledore, that's the question I wanted to ask him. You see, I knew he liked bowling, but I still didn't know what it was. It took me until the middle of my second year to gather the courage to ask him, but he enjoyed explaining it. He even

Showed me a game in his pensieve! I'd never been in one before, and it was so real; almost like being there. Anyway, so since then I've known bowling, though I've never been."

"Well, maybe we'll get the chance to all go sometime before you return to school," Remus suggested.

It sounded like a grand idea, and Harry and Neville were both looking forward to it. Harry had only been bowling once, at Dudley's seventh birthday party, when he was forced to come along, but stay out of sight. Harry had gotten mixed in with a group of kids from another party though, and had gotten the chance to bowl a single frame before his Aunt Petunia had found him and dragged him away by his ear. But even though he only bowled that once, and had only managed to knock down a solitary pin, it remained firmly implanted in Harry's mind. It was probably his happiest thought of that year. Not patronus worthy exactly, but not too shabby either.

The rest of the time before Christmas flew by with Remus now part of their trio. He joined in with their training, and was impressed by both Harry's and Neville's dueling skills. Actually with three it was more of a fair challenge, as Remus and Neville together could fight Harry as a team. Harry still hadn't managed to get a clear upper hand against them both, but could fight them to a draw nine times out of ten. As long as he could hold off both their attacks though, Harry felt the practice was worth it.

Christmas Eve day was soon upon them, and Dobby and Winky were preoccupied preparing all the foods for the feast in two days' time. Cooking for fourteen people; half of whom were Weasleys; required a lot of preparation, and Winky wanted to make sure everything was perfect. Harry too did some work that morning, deciding on and making a simple dessert. Crème Brûlée was something he'd had only once before (while dining in muggle London), but he read that it was simple to make, and easy to vary.

So Harry found a recipe in a cookbook he'd bought, gotten the necessary ingredients (basically just eggs, cream, and sugar), and made the batch over a double boiler. He was expecting fourteen people, so Harry decided to make sixteen portions just to be safe.

And because it wasn't the only dessert, they were small portions at that.

The mixture got poured into separate small ramekins, and Harry added a chocolate sauce to some, fresh raspberries to others, and a pumpkin puree to the final batch. Then they all got moved to the refrigerator to cool and set, and all Harry had left to do was clean his mess. The last part of the process, broiling sugar on the surface to make a hard, sweet crust, could be done just moments before presentation. The cookbook even suggested use of a blowtorch for the step, but Harry knew he'd survive with just his normal oven.

The elves' cooking wasn't so simple though, and Harry's personal foray into the kitchen had disrupted their schedule, so Harry, Remus, and Neville decided to get out of Dobby and Winky's way for the rest of the day. There was no way they'd be getting a home-cooked meal with all the preparations going on, and decided to eat out. None of them however, expected to be literally shut out of every restaurant and shop in sight. It was Christmas Eve! Harry only remembered too late that no one in their right mind would keep their place open, and would instead spend the time home with their families.

"Well, this is surprising," Remus admitted. "I don't think I've ever been out among muggles on this day before, otherwise I'm sure I would remember this. Usually I just stay in around the holidays, and now I know why. Any suggestions about how to get a meal? I saw a fast food place open a few blocks ago, but I'd rather something else if it's available."

Neville was clueless, and suggested the fish and chip stand, but suddenly Harry had a better idea.

"I know! I remember something from when I went to primary school. There was this kid who was Jewish, Zach Schwartz, and he always used to joke about there not being anything to do this time of year. He always used to complain they played the same boring movies on the telly, and there was nowhere to get a decent meal. Except one place! He said he and his family always used to eat Chinese and go to the movies on Christmas! It's the only places open."

"That does make sense," Remus agreed. "The Chinese celebrate the holidays differently. Do you know of any Chinese restaurants around here though? Or a cinema for that matter?"

Harry didn't, but a quick look in the phone book solved that problem. Neither Remus nor Neville had enough experience to make sense of the listings, but Harry found three Chinese restaurants all on the border of London's small Chinatown, not too far away. Harry hadn't been in that direction before, but the streets were practically deserted, as was the train system. In no time at all the three found themselves in front of exotic store windows with hanging meats and delicious looking sauces, and all three places were open for business!

One was a little less ethnic, and perhaps more English than the others, and that's where Neville decided they should go to. It boasted a large buffet table, and the many options in sacrifice of authentic dishes or perhaps food quality seemed a good trade off. It was the first time either Remus or Neville had had Chinese food past the basic stir fry or egg rolls, and Harry enjoyed explaining what the different dumplings and bean pastes were. He was wrong in his descriptions just as often as he was right, and all knew it, but nobody cared. The added conversation made the meal only more enjoyable, and two hours passed before the trio left their empty plates behind.

Deciding to walk a ways back home, Harry stopped to look at another phone book; this time looking for a cinema. There were two nearby; a multiplex and an older, but more stylish single house. When Harry listed the movies that were playing though, Remus grinned like a mad man. Apparently he'd heard of one of the choices; a midnight movie; and insisted they go to see that one. There was a screening of another movie before it though, so the group decided to turn the evening into a double header. It wasn't as if they had anything else to do!

Unlike the rest of the city, the theater was almost packed to capacity, and Neville gawked at the massive size of what he correctly assumed was a "gigantic telly." It was a first experience for Harry as well, as he'd never seen a movie in a theater before. It didn't even matter what the movie was really; it was just the experience he enjoyed.

It was just plain luck that the first movie was highly enjoyable, and simple enough for even Neville to understand with his limited knowledge of all things muggle. It was an American action movie, with an apparently popular star, who the rest of the crowd was familiar with. None of them knew who the huge guy was with the bad Austrian accent, but they didn't care. There were topless women, massive explosions, car chases (almost as good as watching Quidditch; Neville said), and the good guy won at the end. It was a pointless, thoughtless movie in other words, but it was perfect. Just the sort of thing for three single guys to watch together.

After a forty minute break when Neville was introduced to the wonderful world of popcorn, the second movie started up, and Remus had an odd sort of glint in his eyes, to match the crooked smile on his face. The three had managed to keep their same seats, but almost everything else had changed. Much of the audience was younger and rowdier than those of the first movie, and some of them seemed to be wearing strange clothes. For a second Harry thought they had stumbled across more wizards who had badly dressed as muggles, until the opening scene of the movie started up, and Harry realized a lot of the women (and some of the men) were dressed just like the attractive brunette on screen. Some chic named Janet.

Both Harry and Neville shared concerned looks when the characters (both on and off screen) began singing, and neither could be more surprised when Remus started in himself. Harry never caught the full song title because he was so stunned about what was going on around him, but he did manage to catch a curse word in there somewhere. It was only after the first musical number, when the two main characters were approaching an intimidating looking castle (not like Hogwarts though), that Remus whispered to Harry that this was a popular old movie, and that it had become a sport of types to show up in dress and sing along. Remus hadn't seen the movie in years, but apparently he, Sirius, Peter, and both Harry's parents had once upon a time gone to see the movie together, and had even dressed the parts. Harry wanted to know right away who had dressed as what (he noticed a few odd looking leather getups on the blokes), but Remus insisted that he just enjoy the movie, and ask questions later. Harry conveyed to Neville what little he had learned, and reluctantly sat back to listen to another song; this time about transvestites.

"What's a transvestite?" Neville asked. "If they're from Transylvania, are they some sort of vampire?"

It was hours later, over steaming mugs of butterbeer, that Remus finally explained more about the cult movie, and told who had worn what the one time he and his old friends had gone out in full regalia. Sirius had spelled his hair blonde and dressed as a scantily clad Rocky, Lily had been fetching in a slip and bra as Janet (Harry blushed red and Neville gave cat calls when Remus promised to dig out pictures), Remus had been the Riff Raff, Peter had been the wheelchair bound Dr. Scott, and James of course had been Brad, although he had refused to strip down to briefs in the end scenes.

Never before had Harry enjoyed stories about his parents so much; so much in fact that the constant mention of Peter being present couldn't even bother him. He may not have been celebrating Christmas Eve in the traditional manner, but he was still spending quality time with his friends and family, and Harry was happier than he'd be in a long time. He was even thinking about making Chinese food and "Rocky Horror" a new tradition. Perhaps next year he'd even dress a part, and invite the rest of his friends. He could just imagine Ron getting into black stockings and a corset, and Merlin knows he wouldn't mind seeing Ginny dressed as Janet in her rip-away slip, or Hermione as the devilish but seductive Magenta.

It was with more pleasant thoughts, and a tipsy head from too much butterbeer, that Harry finally went to sleep sometime in the early morning. He, Neville, and Remus had already decided to wait until Boxing Day to exchange gifts, so there was no reason to rush to wake up. For that alone, Harry was glad Ron wasn't sharing a room with him. No, Harry would have a chance to sleep in the next day, as the only thing he had planned was the visit to St. Mungo's; and that wasn't until the afternoon. Remus wanted to stop by and see some friends (other werewolves), so it was just Harry and Neville that would be making the trip. So as he drifted off to sleep, Harry was deciding what excuse he'd spring on Neville to get him to the hospital. Neville had mentioned visiting his parents briefly, but hadn't made a specific request yet, so Harry knew he could surprise his friend. And yet again,

as he drifted off to sleep, Harry didn't even realize that he'd forgotten his Occlumency exercises.

Author Note:

Well, that's the next chapter for you! I can imagine some of you will be disappointed that not a lot happened in this one action-wise, and I've yet again gone into too much detail, but the way I see it is this. Harry has never before had a chance to properly experience Christmas, or enjoy time away from school other than the one summer he stayed at the Burrow. So it would make perfect sense, especially the way I've continued to write his character, that Harry would make a big deal out of everything Christmas he could, including the trees, decorations, etc. He's also using the time to get to know Neville better outside of Quidditch, classes, and the D.A., and Harry's finding he likes him very much. (Not that much, you slashers!)

By the way, I hope I got all the Christmas terminology and stuff right, as I really have no idea what I'm talking about. Like Harry, I've never done a tree, or gotten ornaments, etc., but for different reasons. It's because I myself am Jewish, and grew up celebrating the great made-up holiday that is Chanukah! Yes, that's right. This chapter was self biographical in part because I grew up just like Zach Schwartz, hating all the crappy Jimmy Stewart movies on TV, and always eating Chinese food and going to see the theaters on Christmas day. Really! There's not a blasted thing else to do! I suppose I could tell you I sit at home and spin a stupid dreidel for hours at a time, but nobody hates those things like the Jews themselves. So if I hear one "Dreidel Song" joke in any review, I'm hunting your ass down!

You'll be pleased to know however, that I've set a lot up in this chapter to happen. You probably all picked up on the "Harry not doing his Occlumency exercises" hints, but there were plenty more in there. Next chapter is a bombshell, with possibly the most action I've written yet, so I hope that will please you all, and you can patiently wait until I put the finishing touches on it. This chapter, along with 24 and 25 are part of a three chapter arc (the same one I had to rewrite last month), and they all tie in together very nicely. So why this chapter alone may seem a bit boring, think of it kinda like "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace." It may suck by itself, but as part of a whole, it's pretty good.

Oh, and I threw in plenty of jokes this chapter (more than I originally had) to make up for the boring stuff. I especially liked Dobby's rollercoaster ride, and Neville's "What's a transvestite...is it a vampire?" line. The whole Rocky Horror thing I added at the last moment, as I thought it would be cute to inject some past history of Harry's parents in the story, and I can totally see James and Sirius dragging the rest of their friends out to see it. Plus I like the imagine of Lily and/or Ginny dressed up as Janet. I may one day even do a short ficlet about this scene, but not for while. Anyway, if there are any "Rocky" fans out there like me, I hope you liked this little bit.

And as always, I've started to resend to reviews in a separate file in my Yahoo! Group in the "Files" section, as people seem to like it there better. You'll have to join to view it, but it's free and easy, and I hope if you've read this much of my fic (300,000 words I think), you'd have no problems joining my group. I don't respond to everyone, but almost, so please log in to see if you're there. And if for some reason you'd like me to send you the file myself, just email with the request, and I'll get it out to you the first chance I get.

That's it for now folks! The next chapter should be in 2-3 weeks, and I'll probably host a chat to discuss this chapter in my Yahoo! Group sometime this weekend if you'd care to drop by. Later!

Ross

## Chapter 24 – Houseguests, Pt. 1

The next morning; Christmas Day; Harry woke up late feeling like ass! Whether due to the excess amount of butterbeer he'd consumed the night before, the huge meal of fried goodies he'd dined on at the Chinese restaurant, or his forgetting to practice Occlumency, he had no idea. Right then, Harry much didn't care. Not even the extra long lie-in he'd had did him any good. It was going to be a rough morning.

To be precise though, it wasn't that Harry forgot his Occlumency exercise; it was just that he hadn't done them. A week ago when his double had failed to show, which Harry had correctly assumed to be an indication that he was taking a break from training, Harry also decided to forgo the nightly meditations he usually underwent, to see what would happen.

Each of the many Occlumency books he'd read theorized that many different things could happen as result. The largest possibility was that his many mind spheres could start to deteriorate, and would flood into the outer layer of his mind. Another theory was that all the experiences he'd had since his last meditation would be grouped with his inconsequential thoughts, but his inner mind would otherwise remain intact. Not knowing for sure, Harry decided to use the holidays to find out. Even with the daily adventures he was having with Neville, Harry was more relaxed and unchallenged than he'd ever been at Hogwarts. Knowing there was a large possibility he'd be laid out in the hospital wing for days unconscious, or otherwise incapacitated, Harry wanted to find out for himself what would happen before that actually occurred. And with his track record, it would be sometime before the end of the school year.

Still, as Harry took an extra long and hot shower in his luxurious bathroom, he tried to concentrate on his headache, and detect what the cause was. More than just a slight hang-over; more than just his mind being cluttered with unsorted memories, Harry knew the slight taint he was picking up. It was dark, and evil, and reeked of Voldemort.

Ever since his last vision; of the last group of Death Eaters not showing to a summons, and Lucius being put in charge of finding

them; Harry had sensed very little through his link. One of the down sides, unfortunately, of being such an accomplished Occlumens. Normally a person would take the silence as good news, but not Harry. In his case, he knew that Voldemort wouldn't stay silent much longer; especially considering the news about the Prophecy he found out from Malfoy. Ever since Halloween, Harry had been expecting reports of Voldemort sightings in The Daily Prophet. Now that he no longer had a reason to bide his time, what was stopping him from major assaults on the public? Still, the only news that continued to be regularly reported on were the Dementor attacks on muggles and a few wizard families.

Now though, for the first time in months Harry's head was throbbing, and his scar was tingling. It would be just like him to amass an attack on Christmas day, and Harry was already wishing the day would be over with.

"Morning Winky, Dobby. How did you sleep?" Since Harry hadn't slept well, he only hoped his other friends had. As he left his suite and entered the kitchen, Harry noticed that Neville was also eating already at the table, although he looked just slightly better than Harry did. They really had stayed up way too long last night.

"Wes is sleeping very fine, Mr. Harry Potter sir!" Dobby answered. "Winky is wanting to be doing more than sleeping last night, but Dobby was too tired. But Mr. Harry Potter sir is not wanting to be knowing about that, is he sir?"

"Dobby!" Winky yelled out. "Yous is being a bad house-elf for talking about that! Bad Dobby!" Harry almost laughed at the blush she had on her little face. It almost matched the one Neville was showing, as he finally figured out what Dobby had meant by his comment. It had taken a very long time, but at least now Harry knew for certain that Dobby and Winky were more than just co-workers and roommates.

"Yeah," Harry joked, "bad Dobby! A gentleman never kisses and tells, Dobby. Remember that."

"Uh, errr," Neville stuttered, "I think I'm done." He almost tripped over his own feet, on his way to put his plate in the sink. "I'll be watching

the telly until we leave, alright Harry?" He didn't even wait for an answer. Faced with the possibility of talking more about the house-elves' sex life, Neville ran right out the room.

"I think you scared him, Dobby. Way to go!"

Harry just laughed as he served himself some of the cooked eggs and bacon, while Dobby patted himself on the back, and put away the leftovers.

A short time later, Harry was all done, and met Neville in the muggle room. For once he wasn't watching the gardening channel, but this time some movie, and didn't mind turning it off when Harry approached. Neville knew that they were going to Diagon Alley that day, and then a visit to St. Mungo's in the afternoon, but other than that, Harry hadn't told him much of what they had planned.

"All ready for a big day, Nev? I expect you're excited to see your parents."

"Yeah," he agreed, "thanks again for not minding Harry. I know they don't say much, but they're my parents, and they're all I've got. It just wouldn't be Christmas to me without seeing them."

"I don't mind," Harry told him. "I wish I had someone to spend the holidays with every year. Anyway, I just need a quick word with Remus, and then I thought we'd spend the morning walking through town to The Leaky Cauldron. I figured we could have lunch there, spend some time looking around, and then go to St. Mungo's when we're ready. You can even stop off at Gringotts if you need."

"Sounds good Harry, but Remus is already gone. He must have left before we even got up. There was a note on the kitchen table saying he wouldn't be back til late, and for us to not wait up for him. Was it important?"

Harry frowned. "Sorta. Listen Neville, I want you to be ready today for anything. My scar's been acting up, and that usually means Voldemort is up to something. Diagon Alley should be patrolled by aurors, but just in case, I want you ready to defend yourself. Alright?"

Neville looked worried. "Nothing will really happen today, will it? I mean, even Death Eaters have families to spend with on Christmas day! He couldn't attack now."

Harry disagreed. "He could Neville, if only because it's unexpected. Anyway, I'm not sure of anything, I just want to be extra careful today. I'm wearing my full dragon hide set, and I want you to wear your portkey too. That way if anything happens, we'll be covered. I'm going to write a short note to send with Hedwig, and I guess we can leave when I'm done. Sorry to be a downer; I just want to be careful."

Neville agreed, and went back to watching his movie while Harry walked to the library and composed his letter.

Dear Minister Bones,

Sorry to be so blunt, but I woke up this morning with my scar hurting, and I'm sure by now Dumbledore's told you what that means. I'm not sure of anything, but I wouldn't put it past Voldemort to try something today. So if you're able, I would suggest calling in some extra aurors, or at least have them on-call. I know the timing sucks being Christmas and all, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. Either way, it's your call, I just thought I'd let you know.

Harry Potter

P.S. If nothing turns out, have a Happy Christmas, and please wish the same to Susan for me. And since I never got the chance to tell you; congratulations on becoming Minister (even if it's only temporary.) It's refreshing to have a competent person in office for a change.

It wasn't the best letter he'd ever written, but it got the job done. Pulling another piece of parchment, Harry wrote another like it to Remus, and a third to Dumbledore. Even though Harry was still angry with the man, Dumbledore really was the best person to have the information.

Turning to face Hedwig who was perched on the back of a study chair, Harry handed her the three envelopes. "Girl, deliver these three right

away. Do Madam Bones first, then Remus, and then Professor Dumbledore. Got that all?"

Hedwig nodded her head, and in a burst of gold and white flames, disappeared. Sometimes Harry wondered if she did that just to show off, but since his home lacked any working windows, he couldn't well blame her.

It didn't take much longer for Harry and Neville to get ready, and soon they were riding the lift down to the ground floor. There was a family of three in the lift already when the doors opened to his home, so Harry had to do some quick Obliviating to rid their memories. It wasn't one of the things he'd told Neville he could do yet, but really it was unavoidable. Harry wasn't too concerned though. Not only did Neville not make any stupid comments like "holly crickie Harry, you can Oblivate," but he also didn't even bat an eye. When he thought about it, Harry knew it couldn't be that surprising. After admitting to being able to perform the Fidelius Charm, creating Portkeys, hide his magic use from the Ministry, and the advanced spellwork he'd shown Neville over the past week, a simple Obliviation spell wasn't all that difficult.

Once out in the street, both boys took a long look around, for once forgetting the possibility of Voldemort ruining the day. A fresh blanket of snow had fallen the night before, and had covered up the dirty and slushy streets of London. It was the perfect picture of Christmas. Never before had Harry felt more like a part of the corny Christmas movies he'd gotten a glimpse of, and secretly longed for. It was times like that that Harry had to remind himself that even with all the bad events that had happened to him so far that year, it was still one of the best years of his life.

Most shops were closed, being Christmas and all, but a select few were open. Most were stands selling steaming mugs of cider and coca, and Harry purchased two for himself and Neville as they walked up and down the side streets. Neville chose coca, Harry took a cider, and both were happy. It had been at least five days since they had spent a large amount of time together in muggle London (not counting the night before), and the two strolled leisurely to look in all the window displays, and check out the holiday decorations.

It was nearly a half hour later, the hot mugs of beverage long gone, that the two came to a church service just ending. Whole families were pouring out of the large double doors, and Neville noticed another service was scheduled to begin shortly. He wanted to go in and take a look around; as wizards didn't follow any religion that Harry could tell of; and it was one of the concepts that Neville had been explained, but didn't completely grasp. Harry wasn't sure if it would be proper, but seeing as they had plenty of time to kill, agreed only when he made Neville promise to stray to the back, and not say a word.

The two got some odd glances as they entered (it wasn't normal for two teenage boys to attend a church service without being forced by their families), but were soon after dismissed. Quietly they took seats at a back pew, and waited for the room to fill.

In the few minutes it took, Harry again reminded Neville the little about Christianity he knew himself. In the wizarding world, Christmas was strictly a holiday to celebrate family. Four hundred years ago, according to rumor, there was a mentally unbalanced wizard by the name of Chris Cringle, who used to floo into peoples' homes, and leave gifts behind for those worthy. It was rumored he had had a mental breakdown after a stray curse had hit him, and started the custom to alleviate some of his excess holiday cheer. Most people got left nice gifts, and those that he knew personally and didn't like got left lumps of coal. Back then, coal burned in a floo fireplace wrecked havoc with the system, and caused access to the central system to be shut down for days. Leaving coal behind to those he didn't like was Chris's idea of a practical joke. Years later when Chris died, his kids continued the tradition, in remembrance of their father who became much loved. Over the years though the tale got twisted and skewed, and somehow overheard by muggles. Now Chris's descendants got tons of owl mail each year, thanks to all the little children world-wide who wrote to "Santa." The tradition hadn't lasted much longer than the generation of Chris's kids, and now they were most likely the only family in existence who didn't look forward to the Christmas season. At the time it first happened, squibs who worked in the muggle post system didn't know what else to do; to hide the many letters they couldn't address the muggle way. Over the years the volume of letters had increased, but since in the past no "Santa"

letters had ever turned up in a wrong place or been returned, they had to continue forwarding the mail by owl. When Harry learned of all this in one of the few History of Magic classes he'd been awake for, he'd wondered how many letters the Cringle family had from Dudley. Maybe he could convince them to make a trip for old time's sake, and leave some coal behind?

But explaining about the muggle religion to Neville; about Mary and the three wise men, and all about how Jesus had been born of no mother, and was thought to be the son of God; was more difficult than Harry thought it would be. Neville still hadn't properly grasped the concept of God, nor could he understand how the holiday could be about this holy birth in a barn, in some town named Bethlehem, when it was also seemingly about "Santa Clause" and gifts, and spending time with family.

Luckily, attending the service didn't require Neville to have a large grasp of the religion. In truth, Harry knew that most in attendance understood little more than he did. Christmas mass was the one time a year when those who felt guilty about not attending regular services showed up to exhibit what a good Christian they were, and that they did their part. Much like the Dursleys had done for the years Harry had been forced to live with them. They'd always left Harry alone to wonder in a park when they attended mass, all of five times he could remember. But the park was close to the Little Whinning church, and Harry had been able to listen in through the windows sometimes. That, plus music class in primary school, had ingrained in him at least some of the songs the church sang, and Harry did his best to help Neville follow along.

When the service was over with, Harry decided they spent enough time in the muggle side of London, and steered them towards The Leaky Cauldron. It was already past noon, and the city was starting to wake up from its slumber. Neville even got to hear more songs as a passing by hayride with carolers serenaded the street with their angelic voices. The side of the truck said it belonged to St. Bart's Children Orphanage, and Harry and Neville both donated what little muggle cash they had on them when collections were taken.

Finally they reached the small and dingy door of the entrance to their world, and Neville was the first to step through the doors. Beyond the threshold was a world of difference. For once inside the dank barroom, Harry noted there wasn't an ounce of holiday cheer, nor decoration, nor even a hint that it was in fact the holidays. There were hags in a back corner, seedy looking men at the counter, and good ol' toothless Tom behind the bar. He waved over to Harry and Neville, and because they weren't in disguise this time, the two ventured over to share a quick word.

"Hey Tom, Happy Christmas!" Harry said cheerfully. Just because everyone else in the room was ignoring the holiday, didn't mean he had to.

"Hello Harry. Hello Mr. Longbottom. Happy Christmas to you too, although I'd appreciate it if you kept your voices down. Not everybody is as appreciative of the holidays as you seem to be." To illustrate his point, Tom gestured to the men who had sneered at the well wishes, and moved away from the jubilant duo.

"Sorry," Neville mumbled.

"So what are you two doing here today, instead of spending it with your friends and family?" Tom asked.

"Well, we're going to St. Mungo's later to see Neville's parents," Harry answered him, "but we wanted a quick look around in the Alley. I've never been before during Christmas, and Neville says there's plenty of new things to see."

Reminded of the fates of Frank and Alice Longbottom, Tom faltered for a moment, before agreeing with them that the Alley was a sight to see. They traded some more small talk, and deciding to skip lunch because not that much time had passed since breakfast, Harry and Neville were soon on their way to the back door. Before they left though, Harry thought of the warning he had given others because his scar had been hurting, and knew he should give Tom the same counsel.

"Tom, did you ever get one of those new portkeys the Ministry has been distributing?" Harry asked.

"Portkeys? Oh yeah, they were given to all businesses in the Alley. Mine's posted on the wall in the corner." Harry turned to look for it, and saw a large handle nailed to the wall, in an awkward spot behind a large table and chairs.

"Um, Tom. It's kind of inaccessible there, don't you think?" Harry mentioned. Currently, you had to move aside three chairs and push the large table to the side to even reach the portkey. Not much good it would do there, in case of an attack.

"Well, that was the largest wall available, and that's where the Ministry said it should go. I guess I could rearrange the furniture some, but it's been so long since I've done that, I'm almost scared to."

Harry smiled at the thought. He supposed The Leaky Cauldron had been a fixture in the wizarding world for so long, moving the furniture was almost unthinkable. Still, Harry's scar was still bothering him, and he asked Tom to consider it, at least for the day. The crowds Christmas Day were small, and Tom didn't need every single chair to be out.

"Well," Tom said after Harry asked him again, "I suppose I could move the table out of the way once the lunch crowd clears out. I got some space in my back store room I'm not using right now, and I think it will fit. For you Harry, I'll see to it."

"Thanks, Tom," Harry said. "For some reason, I think you won't be sorry." Tom raised his eyebrow at that, but Harry and Neville were already heading to the back alley. Neville got to tap the bricks since he was first there, and soon the archway to Diagon Alley had opened up.

"Wow," Harry said. "It really does look different."

Harry wasn't exaggerating either. The streets were bordered in a pristine white as the snow there had been untouched by dirty snowplows or car tracks. Each and every single window in view had

small trees and wreaths proudly displayed, with special holiday prices on their products advertised. Previously, Harry had only been to Diagon Alley during the summer, where most of the businesses put emphasis on school children. Now though, not just children, but everyone had something special to find among the many store windows, and Harry was amazed at how wonderful, yet more adult the Alley seemed.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Neville asked. "I used to love coming to the Alley when I was younger. My Gran was never much fun alone during the holidays, and I used to love looking at all the families having such a good time together. I remember one year, when it didn't snow, a whole group of people got together in the town square and cast simultaneous charms to conjure some. There must have been two hundred people all making snow! It was great, and there were mounds of it to play in. A huge snowball fight broke out for all the kids. I wasn't allowed to join, but I remember watching it. It looked like a lot of fun."

Harry could only nod, as he was shocked just how much of a sheltered life Neville really had led. His gran hadn't even let him join in a simple snowball fight? What was the danger in that? Harry doubted that Neville could have been hurt, but knew it didn't matter now. That was all in the past, and Harry wanted to concentrate on the future.

"Why were so many people there Neville?" Harry asked. "In fact, why are so many people here now? I knew a few shops would be open, but I didn't expect Diagon Alley to be so busy."

"It's not like muggle London, Harry," Neville answered. "Everyone takes the morning off to open gifts and spend with their families, but the Alley always reopens by at least noon. Diagon Alley is never closed down. For Christmas the shops usually close early the night before, and open late today. It's just normal, I guess. Even when You-Know-Who was at the height of his power last time around, Diagon Alley was always operating. It's a center of the magical world! At least, here in the U.K."

Again, Harry was surprised wizard and muggle customs differed so much. He just smiled though, not wanting to dwell on the differences. "Come on Neville, let's go!"

For the next two hours, Harry and his friend had much fun browsing all the shops, picking up a few things that looked interested. Harry needed some more potion ingredients, and Neville wanted to get a salve for Trevor (his skin got dry in the winter), but other than that, almost all of their purchases were frivolous and spontaneous. Harry had a lot of fun.

He also made some stops to see some of the people he'd met last time. Lemarin Leeds was pleased to see Harry again, who couldn't praise his trunk enough. He let Lemarin know that everything was working just fine, and reminded the man that he was still keyed into Harry's security measures, but to only enter with Dumbledore in extreme circumstances. Now more than ever (with ten people illegally imprisoned within his trunk), Harry was nervous about people gaining access.

Walt Whiggman was pleased to see Harry, and thanked him for the update letters he sent after every one of his Quidditch games. Already Harry was convinced the new broom would be a huge success, and Neville agreed. Harry introduced the two, and Walt was pleased to hear that Neville was a beater; the same as his old position. Since the beater's broom was the other prototype done, and Walt was in such a good mood, he promised Neville that he'd give him a special discount on the broom when it was finally released. Neville was happy to hear about that (he still flew an old used Shooting Star), and promised to take him up on the offer.

That brought a question to Harry's mind. "Walt, when will the new brooms be out, anyway? Still aiming for next summer?"

"Next summer indeed, Harry. Unless things go horribly wrong, and I have to wait until next Christmas, I should have a few hundred brooms for each position ready and packaged by the time you get out of school for the year. All the modifications and last minute changes have been made, I'm only now waiting for my investments to pay off. I didn't want to have to put my shop at risk to make the brooms; in

case they're a flop; so I invested in a long-term venture with the goblins two years ago. Once the investment matures, I should have plenty of money for an initial run, with still some left over. Then I can use the profits from the broom sales to manufacture even more. The second release will be the largest. I'm thinking of making the first ones special in some way, since there won't be as many of them, but I haven't decided yet. Still, I've got months to figure it out."

It all sounded very technical and well-covered to Harry, and he let the matter drop. Originally he'd been thinking that he could invest with Whiggman to make the brooms, as they were a guaranteed best seller. Harry knew he didn't need to make money, but he still wanted to earn a living somehow eventually. Because he had so many investments in so many different companies (both muggle and non), he thought a good idea was to continue to sponsor promising business ventures. Living on his parents' and Sirius' fortune wasn't exactly fulfilling, and Harry wanted to be his own man.

Harry skipped over visiting Ollivander the wand maker, as Neville still didn't know about his second wand, but together they visited almost every other shop. Harry even took Neville into Knockturn Alley for the first time in his life. Neville had been scared to at first, but after Harry promised him it wasn't was bad as he feared, his friend reluctantly agreed. The fact that the darker Alley was almost completely empty, most likely due to the merry holiday cheer, helped things immensely.

Neville was fascinated with all the strange and new shops he'd never been to before. Harry pointed out the tattoo parlor (though he didn't admit to having any), the knick-knack shop, an occult bookstore, and Neville even ventured into the pet shop devoted solely to snakes and spiders.

Harry's hearing was overrun with the hisses of hundreds of snakes, and Seth too complained; something he'd never done before. Most snakes were kept in cages, but a few of the larger ones were allowed to roam loose, and it made Harry extremely uncomfortable.

Neville though didn't seem to mind, as he was too excited about a discovery. A rare breed of spider was in plentiful supply in a dank and

dark cage, and Neville exclaimed how much they were a favorite treat of Trevor's, but notoriously hard to find. He didn't buy any then, as the small critters would have died before returning to Hogwarts, but Neville made sure to pick up an owl catalogue, so he could order them by post.

Leaving the shop Harry even pointed out the spot where he'd been attacked, and Hedwig had become a phoenix. Neville hadn't heard the whole story before, and Harry still didn't tell it. He didn't want to let on how close to being killed he'd come, but Neville thought he saw a faint red stain on the cobblestones, where Hedwig had lain.

Hedwig, speaking of the bird, still hadn't returned from her post delivery, which Harry was thankful for. If she caught him returning back to Knockturn Alley, especially considering what had happened the last time, she would have been very upset.

A half hour later the two finally entered the brighter and cleaner streets of Diagon Alley, when they literally bumped into the last person Harry expected to see.

"Hey," the person called out from where she had landed on the street. Harry hadn't realized he had knocked into her so hard as to send her to the floor, but he must have. "Watch where you're going!"

"Sorry," Harry said, reaching down to offer his hand. That's when he noticed shockingly colored hair under her dark hood, and the thin, petite form of the person he knew pretty well.

"Tonks! What are you doing here?"

"Wotcher Harry," she greeted him. "Didn't know that was you. Grand to see you and all, but wouldn't a pat on the back be more appropriate than knocking me on my arse?"

Picking her up, Harry smiled. "Oh come off it! I barely touched you. Most likely you tripped over your cloak, and are just using me bumping into you as an excuse."

"Yeah, but it worked, didn't it?" She grinned back. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, sorry about that. Neville, this is Nymph..., ah, Tonks. Tonks, this is Neville. Didn't you guys meet last year at the Ministry?"

"Shuss, Harry," Tonks got serious all of a sudden. "Not so loud. I'm undercover; hence the dark hood. Don't matter to the bosses I can't bloody well see out of the bleeding thing. Neville, huh? Longbottom, right? You look much different than last time I spotted you. Been working out or something?" As if Neville wasn't blushing enough, Tonks actually reached over to grasp the boy's bicep, and gave it a good squeeze. Being half muggle herself, Harry knew Tonks was undoubtedly aware of what lifting weights and working out did to a person. Likely, she had heard about the training equipment from McGonagall, and was just teasing them.

"Umm," Neville stammered, "a little."

"Looks good on you. Keep it up. So Harry, what are you doing in Knockturn Alley? It's pretty safe during the day, especially today of all days, but a shady place still. Dumbledore would have a fit if he heard you went down there. He's already upset enough I reckon'. Do you really think it's wise to be upsetting him so much?"

Harry frowned. "I don't care what Dumbledore would think of it. Don't you think he should be concerned how upset I get with his fiddling?"

Tonks threw up both her hands in a gesture of indifference. "Hey, don't bite my head off. I'm just asking. Minerva told me and the others what happened when you left school. We had a meeting the next day, and almost nobody believed you actually said those things. Ron and Ginny had explained things to Molly, so she didn't go bonkers, and I think Dumbledore half expected the outcome, but you should have seen the others. Snape was clamoring for your expulsion, and Hagrid didn't know what to do. It's not often that some of us see Dumbledore actually admit to making a mistake, and Hagrid looked like he didn't want to believe it."

That surprised Harry. "Dumbledore actually admitted that he made a mistake? In trying to force me to stay at school? Well, I didn't think he'd finally get the point."

Tonks shook her head. "No Harry, he admitted that it was a mistake to make Minerva try and stop you. He was saying he should have done it himself. A lot of us think what he's trying to do is wrong, but he's only looking out for you Harry. At least he didn't say Snape should have done it. I think Snape's trying to redeem himself from the time you sneaked off during the summer. 'So long sucker!' I don't think I ever saw him more brassed off than that moment!" Tonks was laughing now, and Harry quickly brought Neville up to speed about how he'd escaped from the three under invisibility cloaks when he went to meet Remus.

"That doesn't sound nearly as bad as what I heard went on in that Potions class, Harry." Neville said. "That story sounded a lot worse. I could never stand up to Professor Snape that way."

"What Potion class is this?" Tonks asked eagerly. "Why haven't I heard of this one?"

"Well," Harry admitted with a smile, "it's not entirely the type of story Snape would share with others. I'm sure he punishes students who even mention it." Again, Harry spent a few moments going over the highlights to the time he stood up to Snape in class, and later in Dumbledore's office. That he hadn't told anyone before, as he'd been ordered not to by Dumbledore, didn't even cross his mind. But Harry knew he could trust Neville to keep quiet, and Tonks was an adult, and wouldn't tell anymore students. Who cared if she used the information to tease Snape at Order meetings?

After they all stopped laughing at Snape's humiliation, the group moved to an open bench by the side of the road. It was wrought iron; cold and wet from the snow; but a quick heating charm took care of that problem. So as not to arouse suspicion, Harry let Tonks have the honors.

"That's a great story. But where'd you learn that restraint spell, Harry? It's mighty hard to do, and I only know of a few books that mention it.

I didn't learn it myself until third year of auror training, and even then it took me four months to perfect."

"Oh," Harry shrugged, "one of the books I bought had it in it. Remember when I snuck out to Diagon Alley, and all of you were forced to look for me? I bought nearly fifty books that day; a lot of them advanced texts. I've been studying them since." Secretly, Harry was pleased it had only taken him two months to get the spell to work properly. Yes, he no doubt had been devoting more time to training than Tonks had even in auror training, but he still felt good.

"What are you doing here anyway, Tonks. You mentioned you're working undercover. What's that about?"

"Don't you know, Harry? After all, it's because of you I'm out here freezing my tail off. After both Dumbledore and the Minister got a letter from you, a quick Order meeting was called. Two dozen extra aurors were called into work. Some of them are patrolling like normal, and others like me are working undercover. We're here at the Alley, Hogsmeade, the Minstry building, and a few other places. I don't know what you expect to happen, but if something does, we'll be ready.

"I hope no one got angry they had to work on Christmas," Harry admitted. "I just thought it'd be better to be prepared."

"Don't worry Harry; it is. Both Dumbledore and Minster Bones agree obviously, so it's not as if we're all blaming you. Yes, a few aurors were upset at having to work today, but it was more small bickering than real complaints. The only ones called in to work, who weren't already scheduled, are those without families of our own like me. With no wife, husband, or kids; most of us didn't have plans anyway. And personally, I'd much rather be here than at home. My pop made a batch of egg nog the muggle way last night, and it's horrendous. He's forcing everyone to drink it, so it doesn't go to waste. Yuck! I may be cold, but at least I'm sober and not tossing my cookies. Much more preferable, thank you."

"Tossing your cookies?" Neville asked confused. "Is that some sort of muggle holiday thing? Sounds like fun."

Both Harry and Tonks laughed, and Neville blushed embarrassed until then told him what it really meant. He might suffer some slight humiliation, but at least the boy was learning.

"Okay kids, I better be off. Got work to do and all that," Tonks ruffled Harry's hair in a very motherly way, as if she wasn't just a few years older than himself. "Just you be careful. I may not wholly agree with Dumbledore that it's best to lock you up, but it's still dangerous to be out Harry. There's dozens of people looking for you, and it only takes one well-placed curse for things to go horribly wrong. You be careful, and make sure you're off the streets way before it gets dark out. I know you're meeting with Dumbledore soon, so I hope you two come to some sort of arrangement. And for what it's worth, I think Sirius would be thrilled you're selling headquarters. Don't let anyone else tell you otherwise. Both of us hated that place growing up."

"Okay, and thanks Tonks," Harry said. "You be careful too though. My scar's still hurting, and it's never gone so long before without something happening. We've only got one more stop to make before heading home, but you'll probably be out here all night long. Keep your eyes peeled." No longer did Harry sound like a joyful kid, but he was now being dead serious. Tonks seemed to pick up on his attitude thankfully, and nodded a solemn reply. With Harry confirming his suspicions, she knew something would go down that day. The only problem was; where would it happen?

After Tonks left, and Harry and Neville made their way back to The Leaky Cauldron, Neville asked Harry a little about what headquarters was, and what Tonks had meant.

"Sorry Neville, I can't say much more. Headquarters is the building where the Order of the Phoenix holds all its meetings. Me, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione know about it only because we had to stay there last summer. I'd tell you more, but Dumbledore's got it protected under the Fidelius Charm. That's where I got the idea to use it myself, actually. The building used to belong to Sirius, and he left it to me in his will. I threatened Dumbledore I'd sell it when we had a fight awhile ago, and at the time I only half meant it. But it wasn't such a bad idea, and I'm going through with it. It's one of the things I'll have to take

care of after the Weasleys and Grangers visit. I have to meet with Dumbledore, to get him to remove the Fidelius Charm so I can show the place to potential buyers."

"How do you plan on doing that, Harry? No offence or anything, but you can't exactly force Dumbledore to do stuff, you know. He's the most powerful wizard in the world! If he doesn't want you to sell the place, he can surely stop you."

Harry smiled. "Don't worry Neville, I've got some ideas. I've already got some footwork done, and if push comes to shove, I'll be ready. There're a few things about me that can influence even Dumbledore's decisions, and I'm starting to realize how to use that. A year ago I'd be sick with myself; knowing that I'm using my status to get special treatment. But when others don't play fair, I don't feel too bad about it."

Neville wanted to know more, but Harry avoided the rest of the questions, and soon they were through the floo to St. Mungo's, and both boys landed on their two feet. Neville had come through with his promise to Harry, and had taught him how to properly land. It had taken an hour of flooing back and forth between his Hideaway and The Leaky Cauldron, and half his floo powder supply to learn, but now Harry could land with ease.

The secret, Neville had explained, is that Harry had to acknowledge that his body wasn't really landing when he arrived by floo and portkey travel. Instead, it was transformed and moved by magic, and really just ended up in the same position it left in. So all the time when Harry was bending his knees, preparing for the rough landing, and stepping forward, he was really catapulting himself onto the floor. Even when he saw the floo exist, and didn't think the opening was large enough, he had to stay perfectly still, and trust the magic of the system to get him through the hole. Only by not moving, and letting the floo and portkeys do their thing, would he arrive safely.

Once again in the crowded reception room of St. Mungo's, Harry couldn't help but remember back to his first trip the previous year, when he'd come to visit Mr. Weasley after Nagini bit him. With all the people waiting to be seen, and the many personal clothed in lime-

green robes, virtually the only difference Harry noticed were that that patients waiting to be seen were different. Even the portrait of Dilys Derwent, a former Hogwart's Headmistress and Healer winked at Harry, just as she had the year before. Harry thought he saw worry in her face as well, but with portraits, you never could tell.

"Fourth floor, right Neville?" Harry tried to remember. He knew Mr. Weasley had been on the first floor, and thought when they went looking for the tea room, and bumped into Gilderoy Lockhart, they had ended up on the fourth, although he wasn't sure.

"Yup," Neville called out. His voice was far away though, and Harry noticed Neville was already expertly navigating the hallways. Hurrying to catch up to him, Harry couldn't help but ask if Neville wanted some time alone with his parents while visiting. Harry was sure he could find the tea room this time around, or otherwise occupy himself while Neville visited. Neville wouldn't have any of that though.

"I'd like you to come," he said, "if you don't mind Harry. I'd like to introduce you, as I never really got the chance to last year. Mum and Dad don't usually respond to anyone anymore, but sometimes new people spark their interest. Besides, I'm sure Professor Lockhart would love to give you more autographs. He's been practicing, you know."

"Oh Merlin," Harry sighed. "Don't tell me he's still here! Hasn't he regained his memory yet? It's been over three years."

Neville laughed. "Not much I'm afraid. I just ignore him when I come to visit. Usually he spends all his time reading his old books, and signing photographs. But by the time he finishes one or another, he's forgotten he did it, and has to start again. At least he'll never get bored. I heard the Healers last year say they were giving him disappearing ink, so they wouldn't have to waste so many photos. He's probably signed each one hundreds of times by now."

By then the duo had reached the Janus Thickey ward, and Neville looked about before drawing his wand and unlocking the door with an Alohomora spell. Harry remembered it was a closed ward, and a

Healer had to do the same last time. Neville was eager to walk in, and Harry followed after a deep breath.

The year before, there were only a few occupants of the room. Neville's parents; Harry remembered; plus Mr. Weasley, Lockhart, Bode (who was later killed by a Devil's Snare clipping), and a woman completely covered in fur. Altogether it had been six patients in a room large enough for twenty. Now though, over half the beds were filled, and Harry and Neville weren't the only visitors.

"Neville," Harry whispered, "who are all these new patients. I got the impression that this ward didn't get many new admissions."

"Don't know," Neville answered. "That's Healer Bosworth over there with the blonde couple. She's in charge of this wing. I'm sure she'll come over when she sees me, and we can ask her then."

Harry nodded, but Neville didn't see, as he was already making his way to the back of his room, where the curtains around his parents' beds were still drawn.

Deciding to give Neville some private time, Harry reluctantly made his way over to Lockhart; not knowing what else to do.

"Hello. Do I know you? I'm told I'm a very popular person, so I expect you're a fan. How nice of you to come and visit me."

"Hello Professor Lockhart," Harry sighed. "Nice to see you again."

"Professor you say? Well, how interesting. I don't think I've heard that one before. Taught you everything I know, I expect, did I? How very lucky for you."

The next ten minutes were the longest ones of Harry's life, as he forced himself to pretend to be interested as Lockhart went on about fan mail, and he was forced to accept seven autographed photos of the man. Luckily before Harry had to repeat for the fourth time who he was, Neville waved him over, and Harry made a quick retreat.

"Thanks, Neville. I think I almost liked that man better as a professor."

After that, Neville introduced Harry to both his parents, who were propped up in bed, with blank looks in their eyes. The year before Harry had only seen Alice Longbottom, as her husband had remained hidden behind a curtain. No longer the plump and lively woman in the old photograph Moody had shown him, she had instead been a frail woman with thinning white hair. She didn't look any different now, and her husband looked much the same.

Neville's Dad, while not as thin or unhealthy looking as his mum, had an even more blank look in his eyes. Occasionally Neville's mum would reach out to grasp his hand, or blink and seem almost interested in what Neville was saying. His dad however just remained gazing forward, not even giving a sign that he knew he was there. Neville didn't seem to mind though. He talked on and on about how his year had gone so far, and how much he had changed. He talked about his new wand, being a beater on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, the dueling practice he had done with Harry, and his advancement in Herbology.

Not for the first time, Harry wondered who had been worse off. Harry; for losing his parents at such an early age, and never knowing them, or Neville; for having only known empty shells of the lively and brave people his parents had been. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

"Hello there, Neville dear! I didn't know you were coming to visit today. Your grandmother informed me that she'd be out of the country this year, and I assumed you'd be staying at school. What a nice surprise."

Healer Bosworth had finally made her way over, and interrupted Harry from his depressing thoughts. She looked like a nice enough lady. And with the way she spoke, Harry assumed she knew Neville very well. She'd probably been in charge of his parents for a long time.

"Hello, Healer Bosworth. It's nice to see you. Happy Christmas. I'm staying at a friends' place this year, and I wouldn't miss my visit for the world. Harry, this is Healer Bosworth. Healer Bosworth, this is Harry Potter."

"Oh my," the Healer quirked an eyebrow, "quite the friend you have Neville. Harry, it's nice to meet you. Frankly, with as many stories as I hear, I'm surprised I haven't seen you here before. With all the scrapes you get into, I would have thought you'd be one of St. Mungo's more frequent patients.

Harry smiled. "Thankfully Madam Pomfrey at school is a great Healer, or I have no doubt I would have ended up here. But I've managed to go the whole year so far without a visit. That's a record for me." Harry didn't feel the need to add that he'd been treating his own ailments lately, with the aids of Hedwig and his elvish friends.

"Yes," she answered, "Poppy Pomfrey is a skilled Healer indeed. She trained here, you know, under some of the best Healers of the time. I was a few classes ahead of her in training, but even back then she showed promise. It's nice to know you're not letting her skills go rusty.

The three traded small talk for a few more minutes, and Neville asked for an update on his parents' condition. Not surprisingly, there weren't any recent developments. There hadn't been in over a decade.

"Healer Bosworth," Harry asked once the conversation had slowed, "I was wondering why there are so many patients in this ward this year? Last year there were only five, and even Neville said he's never seen this many before."

The smile had left the old woman's eyes as she answered. "Well Mr. Potter, it's a dangerous time to be living in I'm afraid. With You-Know-You back and all, as I'm sure I don't have to tell you, there's a lot more attacks on the public than normal. It reminds me of the first time around, but luckily it hasn't gotten that bad yet; thank Merlin. Besides Frank and Alice, the rest here are all Dementor victims. Not many wizards and witches have been kissed; mostly muggles so far; but they still end up here when it happens. Poor things."

Looking around, Harry was suddenly struck by how eerie it was to know that. Almost all of the patients in the room were soulless victims, just waiting to die as their bodies slowly deteriorated. Harry had learned in Lupin's DADA class that wizard victims usually lasted a

year or two before they expired. Muggles, if they were lucky, lasted half that. Looking around the room, Harry even recognized one of the pale faces. It was Peter Growkins, the Diagon Alley victim besides Amber, who had been kissed. If Harry had bothered to learn their faces, he would have recognized some of the others as aurors who'd been kissed at Azkaban when Voldemort attacked.

Not knowing better, Harry asked, "So this is where the muggle victims of Dementors get sent, too?"

Healer Bosworth nodded. "Yes, but not to this ward. This ward, and another like it, are reserved for wizards only. St. Mungo's has had to expand, and we've added five additional floors for the muggle victims. We've had to disguise them to appear to be a muggle hospital, so their families can come to visit. So far, we've had almost two hundred muggles admitted after being kissed. Three have died so far, as they were very ill when it happened. I'm afraid it's just a matter of time for the rest."

Two hundred? Harry had no idea it was so many already. 'Mr. Weasley must really be having a hard time keeping the muggle authorities calm, with such numbers,' Harry thought.

"I only wish wizard families would visit their loved ones as often as the muggles do. Not everyone is like dear Neville hear. Most people just forget their loved ones when they're admitted to a long-term ward. I'm surprised so many turned out today, frankly. No one had been in all morning, and then all of a sudden everyone's got visitors."

Gesturing with her hand, Bosworth pointed to the many bodies in the room. Harry couldn't see any of their faces; because they had their backs to him; but there were people visiting almost everyone in the room. The blonde couple was still talking to a comatose woman in bed, and there were another five people hunched over more prone patients. They seemed odd though, as if they weren't really interested in the patients. In fact, they were only talking among themselves, while they kept their stares focused on the sick.

"Well," Neville said, "it is Christmas. Maybe they just all thought now is as good of a time as any. I like spending the holiday with my parents, and maybe they feel the same way?"

"Perhaps Neville, it's just odd is all. I've been working at this hospital for over sixty years, and I know when something's odd. But then again, it's been so long since we've had so many patients in a single ward, I could just be getting old. Now, I've got to go check up on the other ward. You two have a nice time, and it was nice meeting you Mr. Potter. You're a good friend to come with Neville to visit."

Harry thanked the woman for her kindness, and Neville surprised him by actually reaching out and hugging the departing matron. Apparently it was a practiced hug, because neither she nor Neville blushed or in any other way showed awkwardness.

One she was gone, Neville returned to talking to his parents, while Harry scanned the room. Only the blonde couple were acting in a similar manner to Neville, as they visited with their loved one. The rest of the people in the room were indeed acting strange. Not one moved around the room, and they only talked in hushed tones with each other. Sensing something not right, Harry reached over to his watch, to turn on the special features. He'd had to turn it off as he entered the hospital, as all the spell damage and magical objects were playing hell on its sensors. Now though, Harry pressed the button to engage his shield spell, and turned his Dark Mark detector on too. Once that happened, a jolt so painful Harry almost jumped shot right up Harry's arm. According to his watch, there was a Death Eater in the room. And he or she was mighty close!

Nonchalantly, Harry made his way closer to Neville, and out of the corner of his eye saw the blond couple reach down to hug the person they were visiting. It was apparent they were getting ready to leave, and Harry had no doubt that once they did, all hell would break loose. Most like the rest of the people in the room were Death Eaters; or at least one of them; and they'd been waiting for the Healer and the others to leave. Harry didn't know how they had known to be waiting at St. Mungo's for him in this specific ward, but that wasn't a concern now. Living through the next few moments would be.

"Neville!" Harry fiercely whispered. "Neville, we've got trouble. Don't turn around; just listen to what I say."

Neville had been telling his parents all about the video games he'd scored records on, when Harry interrupted him. At the warning though, he stopped talking cold, and froze with fear. Harry never sounded so serious unless he had reason to. With all the warnings he'd been giving people all day long, Neville knew Harry wasn't joking around.

"There's at least one Death Eater in the room with us, maybe as many as five. Once that blonde couple leaves the room, I think they're going to attack me. So far I don't think they know I've noticed them, and that's our only advantage right now. Five to two odds isn't great, especially when we don't know who they are. I'm going to try to draw their attention, and I want you to stay here. Hopefully someone will hear the fighting, and come to investigate once they do. We've just got to hold out til then. Okay?"

"I can help you Harry," Neville said. He wasn't feeling too brave at the moment, but he knew he couldn't let Harry take on so many Death Eaters with no help. Just like in the Ministry, suddenly he'd been thrown in a situation way out of control, and all he could do now was the best he was able.

"I know you can Neville, but you mustn't. Stay here and protect your parents. They can't dodge or block stray spells, and are helpless. Remember the shielding spells we've learned. If you get the chance to send out a few curses of your own, then fine, but don't leave your parents behind."

Time was running out Harry knew, as he causally observed the couple gathering their things, and closing the curtain around whoever they were visiting. None of the other figures had moved yet; all still had their backs to Harry; and he used the time wisely to look around, trying to figure out how best to make a stand against the Death Eaters. He would have apparated to Order Headquarters in a second to gather reinforcements if he was able, but since Voldemort's attack on Azkaban, increased security had put up anti-apparation wards on every floor.

He and Neville still both had their portkeys, but even that wasn't a perfect idea. Neville's parents would be left behind in the hands of Death Eaters, and that wasn't acceptable. If they were mobile, or even closer together, Harry knew he could have gotten them both to touch his watch, and be whisked away. But they were too far apart in separate beds, and the portkey Harry had made for Neville wasn't large or strong enough to transport more than one person. While it was impossible to follow a used portkey, it was possible to detect the use of one, and Harry had taken that into consideration when making Neville's. The smaller it was, the more difficult to detect, and Harry had made it as weak as possible, while still being able to get Neville out of a tight spot. Now though, that no longer seemed like a good idea. Neville knew about the limitations too, so he didn't even bring up the portkey. Harry could always make another one, but his expertise wasn't yet to the level of Dumbledore's. Harry needed at least five minutes of meditation and concentration to make a portkey, and that was time he was certain he didn't currently have.

Harry's only chance was to stay and fight. Hopefully he could disable or scare off however many Death Eaters had come until security would arrive, and that was the plan he stuck to. The problem was finding a defensible position in the room; away from the other patients; so they wouldn't be struck. It was a large pentagon shaped room, and there was a wall a short ways away with no occupied beds. Harry thought that would be the best place to fight from, and he'd have to quickly transfigure something to hide behind.

"Remember Neville; stay with your parents. Hopefully they'll be so busy fighting me, they'll forget that you're here at all. If you can send a spell from behind, that's great. Otherwise just stay low and remember to watch the other patients. We don't want to deflect any spells into them."

Neville just nodded, and carefully slipped his wand out of his pocket without drawing attention to it. Already standing between his parents' beds, the only other thing he could do was find something to barricade himself with. Harry suggested he transfigure something the moment fighting broke out, but that had never been Neville's strong suit. Harry just hoped most of the attention would be on himself.

Harry didn't have to wait much longer before the blonde couple said their last goodbyes, and went to the door. The second they crossed the threshold, all five other visitors turned quickly around and lowered their hoods. The closest to the door cast a locking and silencing charm on it, while the four others turned to where the boys had been with their wands drawn. But all they saw was Neville crouched behind a sloppy transfigured stone wall. Harry was nowhere to be found.

"Subefy!" Harry said from his new position, after completing a mad silent dash just before the couple had left. The Death Eaters must not have heard him, because the deep navy blue spell caught them by surprise, and two were immediately engulfed in the spell's wash.

"Looking for me?" Harry taunted the others. Not only did he want to draw the attention away from Neville, but Harry also needed time to collect himself that his spell had been so successful.

Cast with his normal wand, Harry had finally used his modified stunner to apparent success. He'd told Neville a little about the spell during the week of training; and Neville had even volunteer to be a Guinea Pig, but Harry had been reluctant. Now though he was stoked the spell had worked, and that both of the Death Eaters he'd been aiming for had been hit. They had both been standing between two beds, and were so close together Harry couldn't pass up the opportunity to take them out of the game. Now if his stunning spell held (vocally modified in honor of Neville's broken nose at the Department of Mysteries, but not his tenacity), the odds would be three to two; much more favorable.

Harry didn't have time to see who the fallen men were, but of the three left standing, Rodolphus Lestrange was recognizable, and apparently the leader. It was him who addressed Harry.

"Well Potter; I see you've learned some new tricks! No matter, you'll still..."

"Mineo Tergum!" Harry yelled out. He didn't care to hear whatever stereotypical bad-guy things Lestrange had to say, and hoped he'd get another spell off before the real fighting began. Lestrange was

quick enough to block the spell though, which deflected away and hit an innocent patient's leg. The spell Harry had used cased the skin to bleed out of its pores, and within seconds the man's thigh was bleeding through his hospital gown. Harry reminded himself to treat the wound later if he got the chance, and reminded himself to be sure to cast his other spells above the Death Eater's waists. Any lower, and he might hit one of the beds.

"You'll pay for that!" Lestrange snarled. "You two," he pointed to the others, "revive Blaycock and my brother, and then get the other kid. I'll deal with Potter."

While not an ideal situation, Harry was feeling more confident than before. Hopefully while the others tried to enervate their friends, Harry would be in a one-on-one fight while Neville might even get to take a few pot shots from his hidden position. With any luck he could disable Lestrange quickly, and help with the others before Neville got too flustered.

Without another word, Lestrange summoned a curtain to partition off his comrades, so Harry couldn't see what they were doing. Then he started to cast multiple spells at Harry, who managed to dodge and block the first three before the fourth one hit him.

"Extorqueo," it had been, and Harry recognized the spell just as it slammed into his shoulder. Dislocating any joint it touched, Harry's arm was wretched from his socket, and his wand fell to the ground from his limp arm. His vest might have caught some of the spell, but because it didn't have any sleeves, wasn't very effective. Likewise his watch's shield spell was much too weak for such a strong pain curse.

Not having a defense, and not being able to draw his spare wand with his useless arm, Harry dived under an empty gurney for his dropped wand. His left hand was still functional, and Harry thanked himself he had practiced aiming with it. While no where near as accurate or powerful as his normal arm, at least he'd be able to duel.

The moment he hit the floor, the tiled wall behind him exploded in a cloud of dust and grout, and Harry's head was covered with the debris. Not caring though, Harry flipped the gurney on its side for

cover, and sent out a barrage of spells in the general direction of where Lestrange had last been. Not wanting to hit anymore innocents, Harry only used disarming and restraining spells at first. He'd only risk something more dangerous if he could clearly see his target.

"You'll pay for that!" Lestrange snarled. "You two," he pointed to the others, "revive Blaycock and my brother, and then get the other kid. I'll deal with Potter."

Neville's face paled with fear as he heard the direction issued by the man he knew responsible for his parents' insanity. "Why do I get stuck facing two Death Eaters, and Harry only gets one?" He thought. There was no way Neville could take on two by himself, even with the stone wall he had transfigured. It was a sloppy job, but inspired by Harry's duel with Rofordit, it was the first thing Neville had thought of. And while not the prettiest thing by far, it was at least solid and sturdy. Not to mention the rebounding charm he'd placed on it would strengthen it as well. Also like in Harry's duel, it had been taught to the D.A. group weeks ago, and Neville was glad he hadn't any problem with it. Later he realized, it might have even saved his life.

Still wondering why the men hadn't attacked him yet, Neville peaked out from behind his shelter to watch the two men trying to revive the fallen. Neville had heard Harry cast what sounded like a standard stunning spell, but the unusual navy color had given away the fact that it was different. 'Must be the personal stunner Harry was talking about,' Neville considered. 'And to think I thought Harry was wasting his time with that!'

Not having any luck, the two men momentarily turned their full attention to downed Death Eaters, and Neville choose that moment to attack. Harry had told him to protect his parents (which he was going to do anyway), but attack if he could manage it. So gathering his Gryffindor courage, he pointed his wand over the wall, and shouted, "REDUCTO!"

It was the most damaging curse Neville knew of, and the resulting explosion was proof enough. Unfortunately Neville had been so quick on the draw he hadn't aimed properly, and the spell flew over both men's heads, hitting a window. It blew the window completely out of the wall actually, and if Neville wasn't so disappointed his spell had

missed, he would have been proud of the power. Still some glass and mortar fell on their heads, and Neville saw one of the men with a small cut on his check.

Deciding to return the favor, Neville ducked just in time as a Reductor curse was thrown back at him, but luckily bounced off his transfigured wall, and flew towards the Death Eaters. Again under fire, but this time with warning, one of them managed to deflect the spell up over their heads, so it flew out the hole in the wall.

"Rudolphus, the guys won't wake up!" The Death Eater with the cut check yelled out. "Enervate's not working, and this damn kid's barricaded himself behind a wall!"

"Blow the fucking wall up then," screamed a reply in between more curses that Neville didn't recognize. He hoped Harry was fairing well, but as he hadn't yet heard any screams, and Harry was also yelling spells, Neville knew he was.

"Bloody hell," Neville whispered, ducking another spell that brought him back to the situation. The two Death Eaters had forgotten about their fallen brethren it seemed, and both were now cursing Neville and his barrier. Knowing the rebounding spell wouldn't hold up for long under such punishment, Neville gathered what bravery he could, and pointed his wand again over the wall, adding his own spells to the mix. Mostly he was just blocking the ones that made it over the wall, but he also threw in a few of his own. He managed to trip one Death Eater into the other, and shoot a fireball at them both, which caught on their robes. Both men doused the flames before they could do any damage, but at least it slowed them down. "Harry," Neville pleaded, "please hurry!"

Still on the floor under a gurney, but at least with his wand back in his hand, Harry didn't let up on his tirade of spells until he formulated a plan of attack. The gurney defense wasn't working for him, as Harry had no idea where he was aiming, and he was trapped in a tight space with little room to dodge. His speed and size were advantages in his dueling technique, and Harry had no chance to utilize them from the floor. Knowing there was only one Death Eater to deal with, Harry decided to take his chance with a face to face fight, and banished the gurney right towards Lestrange.

Lestrange was just about to melt the metal gurney down when he realized it was flying straight towards him. Stopping his spell mid-word, he barely managed to get his left arm up in time to swat the table away. The force that it hit his hand with was strong, but only strong enough to recoil his hand a few inches, and cause a sharp sting. When he turned back to face where the gurney had come from, he saw a bright light coming from Harry's wand tip.

"Protego," he called out. He didn't know what the spell had been, but it passed right through his shield, yet seemingly did nothing. Not stopping to praise his good luck, Lestrange counter with a Crucio back at Harry, which was barely avoided.

Harry had dove to the left as the red curse flew where he was standing, and countered right back with Relashio. The flame throwing spell had worked well against Goyle in Diagon Alley, but Lestrange was a lot more talented. He conjured a physical shield that blocked the flames, even if it did melt a little. Harry wasn't concerned though. His last spell had hit through the Death Eater's simple shield, and now he was prevented from casting a stunning spell. And most likely, he didn't even know it!

Harry whipped his wand a few more times with the flame throwing spell still activated, until Lestrange's shield was little more than a dripping mass of metal. But knowing that the barrier wouldn't hold longer, Rodolphus dropped to the floor, banished his shield, and cast a quick Cutting curse at Harry.

Still aiming the fire at a spot above the Death Eater's head, Harry barely had time to notice his spell wasn't meeting resistance, and moved out of the way just as the cutting charm reached him. Managing to avoid the worst of it, Harry's lame arm still took some damage. Each time Harry jolted it, his right arm flailed about in pain, and his dislocated joints rubbed raw against each other. As such, the pain the small but deep cut he received barely registered at all.

"Impedimenta," Harry countered, just before his body landed on its side. His aim had been misjudged though, as he wasn't used to using his left wand when casting, and Rodolphus had almost as fast

reflexes as he did himself. The spell flew wide right, and fizzled out on some flowers that adorned a table top. Harry briefly wondered if the spell would let the flowers live longer, but then had to dodge another curse, and was brought back to his senses.

Neville had seen a few flashes of light from beyond the thin curtain that separated him and Harry, but hadn't had any time to think about it as he was busy fighting for his life. Only minutes had passed since Harry had warned him of possible danger, but already Neville was sporting a dozen or so minor injuries, and the two Death Eaters he was facing could make similar claims.

After his conjured fireball, both of his opposition knew they weren't going to get anywhere near Neville's protected position, and they had taken similar cover behind a few beds. It wasn't sturdy like Neville's wall was, but the innocent people occupying the beds were more than enough reason not to blast them out of the way.

Taking the short pause to strengthen his wall and reinforce the rebounding charm (which had almost worn off), Neville had also made sure his parents were alright. Both of them rested at a level far below where his wall reached, and he was relieved to see not even the chunks that had been blown away had exposed them to any stray curses so far.

Until the Death Eaters moved from behind their human barrier, there was not much Neville could do except wait and prepare. Already he was replaying D.A. meetings in his mind, figuring out which spells would be best for the situation. He hadn't nearly the arsenal of spells that Harry had at his disposal, but he still knew more than a typical sixth year student would. Remembering Hermione's favorite spell, Neville jumped out from behind his cover, and began firing bean bags off in rapid fire.

"Contendo Fabopera! Contendo Fabopera! Contendo Fabopera!  
Contendo Fabopera"

Repeating the incantation almost became a manta for Neville, and the spell worked great because it wasn't highly dangerous, and couldn't be blocked or reflected by magical means. Yes, he had inadvertently hit some of the bed ridden people a few times, but that

was only until he had adjusted his aim to hit the Death Eaters instead. The bean bags were painful; but hardly life threatening; and the soulless victims would scarcely notice their discomfort.

Once his aiming issue had been addressed though, all Neville had to do was keep his arm steady, and slightly move his wrist to keep both men under constant fire. His incantations were melting into one long word, and had Neville taken time to count, he would have realized he was firing off shots about the rate of one per second.

It took five times that long for the two Death Eaters to even realize they were under fire. Taking cover behind the ill had seemed like the perfect plan, because they didn't think anyone but fellow Death Eaters would have the nerve or stomach to risk hurting the ill. This kid though; damn him! Not only was he proving to be more powerful and confident than they had been led to believe, but he was also holed up with plenty of cover, and neither of them could get close enough to get a decent shot off.

Once the bean bags started to rain down on them though, it had taken a few hits each to register they were again at a disadvantage, and were now pinned down by spells. The bed they hid behind was open at the bottom, so their feet and legs were left exposed no matter how much they tried to get out of the line of fire.

When Neville noticed that, he did try to send a disarming hex at their legs, but the Death Eaters had cast a protection spell which blocked it. While they might not be able to block the bean bags (they either didn't think of, or weren't able to conjure a physical barrier), they were still aware enough to look for normal magic, and didn't plan on giving up that easily. Not knowing what else to do, Neville switched back to firing his beanbags, and hoped the occasional hits he got on their arms and legs would wear them down.

Rodolphus Lestrange was pissed off, and in a bad way. The plan of simply lying in wait for Harry and his dim-witted friend had seemed so perfect and simple at first, he had been pleased and excited to be given command of the mission. His first mission really, after being released from Azkaban once again by his powerful master. Lestrange knew that with Wormtail's capture and humiliation, Lucius Malfoy's cowardly behavior by claiming the Imperious yet again, and his wife's

near insanity, he had a very good shot at become his Lord's most trusted servant. He'd always been devoted yes; that had never been questioned, what with him proudly admitting to the aurors his loyalties to the Dark Lord when captured after the torture and attempted murder of the Longbottoms. Unlike so many who had scrambled and pleaded; traded names and excuses for a chance at freedom; he had proudly remained true, knowing that one day his master would be resurrected even stronger than before, and would come to free him.

And then a year ago it had happened, and everything had seemed perfect. His Lord had informed a trusted few of his plan to enter Harry Potter's mind, and draw him into a trap where he'd finally be out from under Dumbledore's protection. But things had gone so wrong, he'd been sent back to Azkaban, and had almost lost hope. It hadn't been as bad the second time around (with the Dementors gone and all), but Rudolphus was once again separated from his wife and brother. But he knew Voldemort would come and free him once more, and it had happened.

Then young Malfoy had written his father with some surprisingly good news, and a plan had been set in motion. While Draco Malfoy was perhaps spoiled and insufferable like his father was, he no doubt had a talent for eavesdropping.

Earlier in the year he'd overheard Potter tell his friends about the prophecy during a school trip, and the information had been exactly what Vodermort had been waiting to know before wanting to commit to more public attacks. Now, Draco had informed them that Potter wasn't staying at Hogwarts over the holidays, and in fact that he and Dumbledore weren't on the best of terms. No one even knew where Potter was staying; only that he was taking another boy with him. But Draco also knew; through means of blackmailing a young Hufflepuff girl with evidence of her cheating on a test (unthinkable for a Hufflepuff); that Neville visited his mental case parents at St. Mungo's every year on Christmas Day like clockwork. With the knowledge that Potter and Longbottom were staying together, and that they'd be sure to arrive at St. Mungo's at some point without Dumbledore's protection, the temptation was too much for Voldemort to resist. So five worthy men had been given the task of apprehending them, and Rodolphus had been put in charge.

He hadn't counted on the two boys knowing of their presence though, and that was pretty obvious by the quick response each had taken the moment he and his fellow Death Eaters had revealed himself. He was also told that the Longbottom kid was miserable in all aspects of magic, and was the closest thing to a squib they had at Hogwarts. But by the sounds coming from the other side of the room, and the fact that his brother and the others had yet to join in his fight with Potter, Lestrange knew Neville must have had more of his parents in him than young Malfoy had led them to believe. Damn that poncy brat!

Potter himself was intimidating alone, and things were not going as smoothly as they could have. Yes, after the initial stunning spell taking out his brother and Blaycock, he'd gotten the upper hand and injured Potter. But the kid had somehow managed to get his wand back, and surprisingly had no problem wielding it with his left hand. Not many wizards; mostly aurors and hit wizards; could use either hand to cast spells, but Lestrange should have known better than to take this kid for granted. He'd survived four encounters with his master already; a feat none others have ever done; and shouldn't be taken lightly.

So concerned with only Potter, Lestrange had gone on the offensive, and not held back at all with his spell choices. Only the killing curse was not allowed, as his master wanted that pleasure for himself. But with no other hesitation, he cast Crucio after Crucio spell, Cutting Curse after Bone Breaking Curse, and yet the damn Gryffindor still managed to dodge or reflect his spells, and return some of his own.

Lestrange hadn't known what the first one had been, but had found out later when a stunning spell he sent out had seemingly turned his wand flaccid. But other spells worked just fine, so he didn't have much time to think of what had happened.

Rodolphus had also been hit with a flame throwing curse, which he'd only barely managed to block. Kept under the constant assault, his shield had begun to melt, and his hand had started to burn, before he dropped to the ground to curse Potter from another angle.

He dodged an Impedimenta jinx, but had later been hit with Mineo Tergum, Skeledestruco, and a few minor hexes. The left side of his torso was bleeding, his right knee was shattered thanks to the bone breaking curse, and he'd already had to counter a blindness curse, a silencing spell placed on his vocal cords, hair that had grown down to cover his eyes, and perhaps the most annoying of all, sticking charms that surrounded the floor he was standing on. Not knowing where they were, he was severely limited in his movement, and afraid to be caught in one of the sticky patches.

He'd given as good as he'd gotten though. In between all the dodging and blocking, Lestrange had managed to further damage Potter beyond his gimp arm. A well placed Cutting curse had gotten through to his arm, a bludgeoning spell had caught him in the stomach and knocked the air out of his lungs, and he fired an icicle at Harry's leg with almost no sound, and it had passed though the hastily put up magical shield and imbedded itself into Harry's thigh. Like the conjured bean bags, it too couldn't be blocked by anything other than a physical barrier, and had sliced though Harry's Protego shield like butter. Unfortunately Potter was more prepared the second time around, because when Lestrange saw that his icicle had worked, he tried the spell again. Harry was ready with a conjured shield this time though, and had no problem deflecting the ice. His shield was about two feet in diameter, was circular in appearance, and must have been at least four inches thick. It was one of the advanced shields Harry had learned to use, and for the first time he was putting it into practical use.

Harry was having trouble, and he was more worried now then he'd even been before. Up against only one Death Eater this time, perhaps he'd been too overconfident in his abilities. He thought he'd be able to disarm Lestrange in a matter of minutes, then be able to go help Neville, and perhaps have all five Death Eaters stunned and tied up by the time St. Mungo's security even found out about the attack. But within just the first few seconds; when his wand arm had been hit and rendered lame; things had taken a drastic change.

Now instead of getting the upper hand, Harry was barely hanging on. Only his quick reflexes had let him last as long as he had. Already he'd been hit with multiple serious curses, and he was quickly tiring. Lestrange too was slowing down, but with possible reinforcements

only feet away, Harry knew the Death Eater was in a much better position than he was.

Now with a conjured circular shield on his forearm to block the icicles Lestrange had been lucky enough to get past his shield, Harry resorted to using another advanced spell to hopefully end things.

"Parabolas Umbo!"

With his physical shield still in place on his forearm, another type formed out the end of his wand. Only eight inches in diameter; the shield was a bright yellow in color, and had a concave shape to it. Like the name implied, it was actually a parabola shaped shield; one that was very hard to use, but one that could reflect even immensely powerful spells back at an attacker. Just like satellite dishes in muggle technology concentrated radio and satellite signals to a central focal point, the shield Harry had conjured also reflected any spells it captured back to a single point. This time however, the spell was sent right back to where it came. Used against an enemy, it sent spells right back to the end of an opponent's wand.

The only downside to the spell, and the reason why it was hardly used other than in extreme circumstances, was that the shield's diameter was so small, it took great accuracy and bravery to be able to move the shield in the path of most spells. Going against instinct, the user actually has to move his body into the direct path of the spell. If the user missed even by a fraction of an inch, then the spell would pass the shield, and there'd be no other defense. When Harry first read of it, he compared it to the muggle sport of baseball. It was like trying to catch a spell in the palm of your hand. One wrong move or miscalculation, and the game would be over.

Wearing himself down though, with a whole arm out of commission, Harry didn't know what else to do. A few more minutes of normal defense and he wouldn't be able to stand, much less raise his wand. With his parabola shield though, Harry thought he might be able to surprise and hit Lestrange with one of his own spells. Unlike all the other shields he knew of, this one directed spells back with a hundred percent accuracy. There was no chance for the spell to be sent off at an angle, or three feet over his head, as long as he managed to place

his mall silver shield directly in the path of every spell. Protecting the bed-ridden patients was also a concern of his, and this shield would ensure their safety. Now all Harry had to do was master his accuracy. Anything less than perfection wouldn't be good enough. He still had his physical shield on his forearm in case any more icicles or conjured objects got thrown his way, but he knew that too would wear out soon. He also had to continue to dodge Cruciatus spells, as he knew nothing could block those. He might be able to overcome the pain if he got hit, but Harry wasn't looking forward to that happening. One way or another, this duel would be ending soon.

Christopher Parkinson had had enough of being hit with those blasted bean bags! For nearly three minutes now he and his companion Conrad had been hiding behind a group of beds from the constant onslaught, and hadn't managed to make any kind of leeway. Every time they rose out from behind their cover, that damn wall just spat back whatever spell they managed to shoot at it. What's more, is that they each managed to be hit by a small hex or series of bruises from those annoying bean bags for their effort.

Tired of the situation, Chris got an idea. It was drastic, but they'd only been told not to kill Potter. The other kid wasn't mentioned, although it was implied that he was wanted alive. But if killing him meant they'd get out from behind the beds they were using, and could then go and help Rudolphus with the Potter punk, then Chris thought the risk was worth it.

"Conrad, listen up," he whispered. "I'm sick of this shit. On the count of three, we're going to both stand up, and blast that fucking wall to hell! Avada Kedavra full force from both of us will ensure that. If the kid dies, who fucking cares anymore? Got it?"

Conrad Jenkins wasn't too thrilled about using a lethal spell when he'd been specifically told not to, but against a wall instead of a living person, he didn't mind. He as well was sick of being bitch slapped by the cheap bean bags, and by the sound of things from across the room, Rodolphus could use their help.

"Sounds good to me," he agreed. "Let's teach this kid a lesson!"

Neville had no idea whatsoever what his enemies were preparing to do. So you can imagine the surprise he showed when on the count of three, both of the Death Eaters rose from their covered position, and cast matching green spells right towards him. Knowing what that color signified, and being able to hear the curse shouted at him clearly, Neville lost control of his bladder as he threw himself to the floor; hoping that maybe his parents would make it through the attack alive. He just thanked Merlin that his death would be painless, unlike their torture had been.

With a sickening boom, his meager stone wall was blown apart into nothing more than dust and gravel. Under the power of both Unforgivables, the wall never stood a chance, even with its rebounding curse in place. Nothing was able to block Avada Kedavra! In fact, an outline of where the barrier had been was burnt onto the tile wall behind where Neville's parents were left exposed. The only other thing in sight was the slumped form of Neville Longbottom. His wand was blown out of his hands, blood was running out of his ears, and to the observation of both Death Eaters who went to check on him, he wasn't breathing either.

Neville Longbottom was dead.

Seeing that they had one less threat to deal with, Chris and Conrad wasted no time tearing down the thin curtain separating them from Harry and Lestrange. So far Harry had been managing a good job with only his two shields to rely on for both defense and offence. But faced with three separate opponents attacking from three different angles, he didn't have a chance.

Harry only lasted another thirty seconds before a disarming spell hit him unaware, and his wand went sailing away to Conrad's hand. Still not being able to reach his second holster with his uninjured left hand, Harry was left helpless with only his physical shield to defend himself. He only got to block a single spell before a Reductor curse blew it out of his grip, and the Death Eaters surrounded him.

"Not so tough now, are you Potter? Without all your little tricks?"

"Tough enough to out duel you, Lestrange!" He snarled. "If my arm wasn't injured, this would have all been over a long time ago."

Taking a step forward, Rodolphus let loose with a vicious backhand slap that snapped Harry's whole head around. Made with such force that it would be leaving a red impression on his face, Harry still refused to scream out in pain or look away. After all he had done, the least he could do was die like a man.

"Hold him down," Lestrange ordered the other two. "I don't think our master would mind if we rough him up some before we deliver him. After the pain in the arse he's been, I think it's the least of our rights."

Conrad and Christopher each moved to take Harry's arms, and the more Harry tried to struggle in their grasp, the more his aches and injuries screamed out for him to stop. Knowing he couldn't overcome them physically, Harry had no choice to stop his struggling and relent. And any thoughts of using his emergency portkey were laid to rest, because Harry had no wish to take the Death Eaters with him to his sanctuary, and leave his wand and Neville behind. Noticing the other two were alone though, brought another question to Harry's mind.

"Where's Neville? What did you bastards do with Neville?"

"You mean that other kid?" One of the two Harry didn't know asked. Harry nodded, with fire in his eyes.

"That prick put up a better fight than we'd thought. Malfoy's kid told us he'd be easy to overcome. I'm gonna slap that kid if I ever see him again. I don't care if he is supposedly dating my sister. Longbottom had us both pinned down from behind whatever wall he conjured up. Near-squib my ass! I'm going to have bruises for weeks thanks to all those fucking bean bags! We had to resort to cursing him and the whole wall just to get out from where we were hiding. Damn near destroyed the whole area."

"What did you end up using?" Lestrange asked. "I heard a huge explosion, but was otherwise occupied. Potter's not bad with a wand. Shame he'll never get to use it again."

"Had to AK the wall; no other choice. I know we weren't supposed to kill either of them, but I didn't care at the moment. Potter's still alive though, and I think that should please the Dark Lord enough.

"Neville's dead?" Harry asked. No! He couldn't believe it. Not so soon after Amber! Not after Sirius and Cedric! Not another one of his friends!

"Wasn't breathing," the other man replied. He was talking more to Lestrange to fill him in on what had happened than to answer Harry's questions, but didn't care who heard. "Didn't know if he'd be hurt hiding behind that wall or not, but I guess under two Avada Kedavras, he didn't stand a chance. That wall got blown to smithereens. Nothing left of it but dust."

"You sodding bastard! I'm going to fucking kill you!" Harry had lost complete control. Faced with another death, Harry's suppressed guilt of the others he'd lost came flooding to the surface, overwhelming his senses. Now all he wanted to do was take down a few of the people who were responsible. It didn't matter if he lived or died, as long he took some Death Eaters with him.

Harry didn't even feel the pain in his right arm as he flailed and fought with all his might, trying to get loose of the strong grips he was in. For his troubles though, all he got was a swift punch to the gut.

"Stop your fighting! Don't you know when you've lost?" Another hit to his stomach, and this time a closed fist punch to the face hit Harry hard. Starts formed in the corner of his vision as he tried to shake the cobwebs.

When he finally regained his focus, Harry proudly raised his head in defiance. Not knowing any way free, he'd at least piss these guys off as much as possible.

"I haven't lost yet," he said to them. "Once you bring me to Voldemort, he'll make some mistake somehow, and I'll escape again. I always do, just ask him."

"Show some proper respect when talking about your betters," Lestrange yelled. "No one refers to the Dark Lord by name! No one!"

The next few moments passed by with a blur of hits and kicks to Harry's body. The session was much like what Avery had done to him in Diagon Alley, only this time Harry had three people attacking him, and none of them were using magic. The two goons on his sides had to pocket their wands to hold him with both hands, and Rodolphus seemed to like beating him up the muggle way, perhaps enjoying using his superior strength and size over Harry. Unlike in their previous duel, this time he now held the decisive advantage.

It wasn't until Harry had three cracked ribs, a broken nose, two black eyes, a cut open lip, and had lost his breakfast after a particularly violent kick to the gut, that the Death Eaters paused in their attack. It was time to go, they said, and Lestrange started to look for an object to turn into a portkey. Before that could happen though, the strangest sound rang out clear throughout the room. Strange to the Death Eaters at least. For Harry, it was a beacon of hope.

"Hedwig!"

Out of nowhere she appeared in a flash of white and golden flames, and like she'd done to Malfoy weeks earlier, she began to dive at the Death Eaters, using her sharp talons to dig and claw at the ones holding Harry. But never once did she stop singing, and her song was inspirational. While Harry's pains were eased, and he began to find a hidden cache of strength, the three others were cowering in fear; not clearly thinking. Chris and Conrad still had a firm grasp on Harry, but not once had they thought to draw their wands. Rodolphus Lestrange was busy trying to fend off Harry's feathered friend, as he was her main target. Harry knew he ought to make a move to escape soon, and thought all he had to do was to reach Hedwig, and she'd be able to teleport him away. Before he got the chance to move though, something else equally as wonderful happened.

Neville came out running, screaming like a banshee from a hidden rubble pile, headed straight towards Lestrange. What was even better, is that he was brandishing a bed pan like a beater bat. With his arm

drawn as far back as he could bring it, Harry heard the sound it made when it connected with Lestrange's head.

"Take that you son of a bitch!" Neville screamed as he hit the Death Eater. The bedpan must have been hastily grabbed from under a patient's bed, because unfortunately for Lestrange, while being knocked unconscious, he also got covered with a disgusting spray of shit and piss. Some of it landed at Harry's feet too, but he didn't care.

Knowing a better chance wouldn't come around, Harry shifted all his weight to his left, and managed to knock one of his guards down to the floor. With a quick kick, Harry caught the man right in his face. He expected to be pulled off by the last remaining Death Eater, but Neville had once again come through in a jam. No longer armed with a bedpan, but not having his wand either, Neville attacked the last enemy the only way he knew how. In the D.A. meetings physical defense had never been Neville's strong suit. Ron and a few others had taken to it naturally, but Neville had trained mostly with his new wand. His width and strength though made him a formidable adversary, and Chris Parkinson was finding out the hard way.

Neville managed to land a few sloppy blows before Chris dropped his grip on Harry and reached for his wand. Neville managed to hit him one last time before he lost balance in a failed right hook, and fell to the floor. Chris then had his wand out in no time, and was conjuring bean bags much to his delight. He didn't know the proper spell to launch them at such high velocities, but at point blank rage, Neville was still getting a beating.

"Hoes does it feel, you shite! Not too pleasant, is it?"

Chris didn't get a chance to say much more though. Harry had fallen to the ground once released, and managed to worm his right boot off, and get to his spare holster. Now with Hedwig's wand in hand, Harry wasted no time stopping the attack.

"Stubefy!" Then, turning to Lestrange and a waking Conrad, he repeated his spell. "Stubefy! Stubefy!" Harry hadn't even noticed the increased width and power of the spell, he was so relieved the fight was over with. He might have some broken bones and injuries to take

care of, but all five Death Eaters were incapacitated, and Neville was alive! Not bad, all things considering.

"Neville, you okay?" Harry asked. They both rested a full minute on the ground before either gathered their breath enough to talk, but when Neville answered back, it was with relief and pride in his voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I had two killing curses launched at the wall I was hiding behind, and it got destroyed completely. I think I passed out, but I woke up very weak and hurt. I heard them talking to you and hitting you, but I couldn't stand up. I'm sorry, Harry. But then I thought I heard Hedwig singing, and suddenly I felt loads better. I was able to stand, but couldn't find my wand. So I grabbed the first thing I got my hands on, and came running out. I saw what they were doing to you, and it reminded me too much of what my parents must have gone through. I wouldn't let that happen. I guess we got lucky though, huh?"

"You can say that again," Harry laughed. But it hurt too much to laugh, and soon Harry was coughing up blood for his troubles. "Ouch, don't make me laugh Neville. It hurts too much."

Another few minutes passes before both boys caught their breath, and were well enough to stand. Both boys recovered their misplaced wands. Hedwig donated a few tears to Harry for his serious injuries, and soon Neville had the five Death Eaters all piled up in a corner. Harry called Dobby to clean up the room so there wouldn't be evidence of a fight, and right then Harry was thinking how he could get the five Death Eaters into his jail cell without Neville noticing.

"Harry? Why hasn't anyone come to find out what all the noise was about? It's been at least ten minutes since this all started, and we must have made a racket! I thought by now security would have shown up."

That was a good question, and once again with his normal wand in hand, Harry cast a few ward detection spells to find out why they hadn't been interrupted yet. It didn't take long to find out why. Harry had forgotten that when the blonde couple left the room, one of the Death Eaters had locked the door and silenced the room. The answer

was as simple as the silencing spell still being up. With another sweep of Harry's wand, that too was undone.

"I think we should call security now Harry," Neville said. "But what will we do with my parents?"

"What do you mean, Nev? They didn't get hurt, did they?"

"No," he answered, "but I can't very well leave them here! You-Know-You must have found out that I'd visit my parents today somehow, and that you'd be with me. Now that the Death Eaters failed, what's to stop him from sending more people? My parents mean the world to me Harry! It doesn't matter that they can't remember who I am, or take care of themselves. You-Know-Who's bound to be upset over this. And if I were him, I'd send some more Death Eaters to try this again. I know Hermione's house and the Burrow are all protected during the year, but what about here? Do you think the Order can cast some protection wards, or maybe set up a guard for my parents? Because if they're not willing, then I'm staying right here, even if I have to sleep in the same room!"

"Calm down," Harry soothed his friend. "We'll work something out Neville, I promise. I'm not sure if the Order has enough people to send a full-time guard though. They could have been moved to Headquarters, except I'm selling the place in two days."

Then with a light bulb going off over his head, Harry smiled to himself with an idea. "What if we moved them somewhere else? Do your parents need any special treatment, Nev?"

"Err, no, I don't think so," he guessed. "I know they need to be turned a few times a day so they don't get bedsores. And the few times a week they go for a walk, they need to be supervised so they don't get lost. Other than that though, I'm not sure. We'd have to ask Healer Bosworth."

"Why don't you go out and get her then," Harry prodded him. Neville had managed to get the blood and dirt out of his face, and besides a few tears in his robes, and some bruising under them, he didn't show much evidence of being in the fight of his life. Harry was in nowhere

near similar condition. He still had a gapping hole in his leg where an icicle had hit, then melted. The bleeding had stopped, but it still hurt like hell. He also still had a dislocated arm, a split lip, black eyes, a broken nose, and multiple curses up and down his body. Harry would need some quality time with his potion supply and Hedwig before he'd venture going out in public.

Neville was puzzled by Harry's request, but left anyways. The second he was out the door however, Harry called Dobby over from where he was mopping the floor. Within minutes, the hospital ward was looking better than it ever had.

"Dobby, I need you to get my trunk from the Hideaway real quick. Get it, and come straight back here. Okay?"

"Dobby be going right nowsy Mr. Harry Potter sir, if it being what sir is wanting." Then not waiting for a reply, he snapped his fingers, and returned a minute later. This time Harry's familiar trunk was in tow, and Harry wasted no time throwing the seventh compartment open, and tossing the stunned Death Eaters inside. He had to act quick before Neville returned, so he didn't bother securing them in a cell. Besides, they had been stunned by his personal stunner, and there was no way they were waking up until Harry did it himself.

Not a second after Harry shrunk his trunk and pushed it into his back pocket, did Neville return not only with Healer Bosworth, but two security guards as well. Neville must have told them about the Death Eaters.

"Good lord, child! What on earth happened here? Neville said that there was some sort of an attack?"

Harry had hoped that Neville hadn't mentioned the Death Eaters at all, but without telling him why not, knew that at best it was a long shot. Now, Harry knew he'd have to resort to drastic measures.

"Um, we were attacked," Harry admitted, "but the Death Eaters escaped. Neville and I are both fine, but I think you should check on Neville's parents. Why don't I fill in the guards on what happened?"

Neville was about to complain about the escaped criminals, when Harry caught his eye and pleaded with him not to say anything more. Neville knew after stunning them all individually, there was no way they could have escaped. But Harry's look was a look few could misinterpret. So Neville reluctantly agreed; perhaps because he too was eager to check on his parents' condition.

There was nothing wrong with them luckily; or at least nothing more than usual. And while Neville and Healer Bosworth had been occupied with the Longbottoms, Harry took the time out to tell the guards briefly what had happened. Five Death Eaters had attacked them, two had gotten stunned right away, and after a long battle with both sides getting cursed, the five had used a portkey to leave before St. Mungo's security arrived. It wasn't the truth per say, but Harry had no intentions of telling anyone he was still in possession of the captured Death Eaters. The situation of securing Azkaban had still not been resolved, and Harry wasn't about to let five more Death Eaters; two of which were the Lestrange brothers and therefore in Voldemort's inner-circle; have the opportunity to escape.

When the guards had a good enough description of what had happened, they left the room, presumably to report the incident to the Ministry and to call for aurors. Harry wanted to be gone long before that happened, so he made his way over to where Neville and Bosworth were, still thinking about the plan forming in his head.

"So, everything okay here?"

It was. Healer Bosworth would have a little work to do treating those patients who'd been hit with stray spells and bean bags, but no injury was serious. In fact, as soon as Harry went to join them, she immediately noticed his dislocated arm, and insisted on treating him. Not only was his shoulder again out of its socket, but his elbow too was likewise affected. The Extorqueo curse had done a fine job on him, and Harry argued a good few minutes before allowing the healer to pop his joints back in their sockets. Healing the injury hurt just as much as causing it had been, but at least when she was done, Harry could once again move his arm. It still hurt, and would continue to hurt for a few days, but the worst of it was healed.

After his arm, Bosworth also got him some blood replenishing potion, and general pain relief potions for both him and Neville. By then she'd learned Neville had been the victim of two killing curses, and only the rebounding curse on his conjured wall had dispelled the deadly Unforgivable enough to not kill him outright. She confirmed his heart had stopped beating for a second, and then had been revived not long after. Only Hedwig's phoenix song had healed him enough to be able to sit up and move. Like Harry, he'd be sore and tired for a few days, but would make a full recovery.

"Okay then boys, let's check you into a ward. You'll need to stay the night for observation, but should be fine in the morning."

"Healer Bosworth," Harry said. If she was anything like Madam Pomfrey, this wouldn't be a pleasant conversation. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather leave now, than stay and be admitted. Those Death Eaters were after me, and I'd hate to cause the hospital more risks. I've got two house-elves at home who are more than familiar with treating my injuries, and if I only need to stay for observation, I'd just as rather do it at home where I know I'll be safe. Neville's welcome to stay with me as well."

"I'm staying with my parents Harry, I already told you that." Neville didn't sound like he was going to budge on the matter.

"I know Nev," Harry smiled, "that's what I wanted to talk to Healer Bosworth about. I was thinking your parents could come to stay with us too. You know that extra flat I have? I think we could set it up just for them, and Dobby and Winky could look after them. We're both worried about their safety here, and if we took them with us, then there'd be no chance Death Eaters would be able to get to them again."

Harry was pleased with the misty look in Neville's eyes. Harry knew that look well; it was longing. Not bothering for Neville to agree (really he already had), Harry turned his attention back to Healer Bosworth who was looking flabbergasted.

"Neville's already told me that they both need to be supervised when out of bed, and have to be turned a few times a day to prevent

bedsores. I've got two capable house-elves, one who already has experience taking care of a bed-ridden wizard. Just tell me what else they need, and I'll be sure to provide it."

Before Bosworth even considered letting the Longbottoms out of her care, she brought up a load of legal and medical reasons why it wasn't possible. But the fact still remained that as much as she didn't want to let them go, she had no right to keep them. Legally Neville wasn't of age to make such a decision, but as his Grandmother was unavailable out of the country, and there were no other relatives who could argue the decision in her stead, Neville's wish was the only one that mattered. As long as his Gran contacted the hospital in the next week to approve the transfer, there was nothing more Healer Bosworth could do.

So reluctantly she told Harry, Neville, and a still present Dobby detailed instructions on how to care for the invalid Longbottoms. Mostly it was just maintaining watch and keeping them comfortable, but there were also a few nutritional potions that they required so their health and muscle tone wouldn't further deteriorate. Dobby listened to all the details to share with Winky, but Harry made sure to write them all down himself on a spare piece of parchment just in case. Not that he didn't trust Dobby and Winky, but there was a far cry between caring for two living people, and sweeping the floors twice a day.

After a last plea to change their minds, Healer Bosworth left the room after hugging Neville again and wishing him luck. She called down to the ground floor to arrange transportation for the bed-ridden Longbottoms, but when she returned to the room a moment later, they were all gone. Little did she know Harry had turned a spare linen into a portkey, and used it to take everyone and even the Longbottoms' few possessions to his Hideaway.

The portkey arrived in Harry's basement as usual, and through a bit of magical expansion, everyone was able to fit in the lift. When pressing the thirteenth floor button Harry briefly wondered if the Longbottoms could see it, but the thought left his mind quickly. Neville was crying tears of happiness, and the expression on his face was enough thanks for Harry. He knew he was doing the right thing.

"Where the hell have the two of you been?" Harry heard the second the lift doors opened. He knew it was Remus, but not able to see him yet, Harry waited until the Longbottoms got pushed out the doors before even thinking of how he'd answer that question.

"Neville? Harry? What the hell is going on here? Aren't these Neville's parents? What, did you smuggle them out of St. Mungo's?"

Turning to Remus, about to laugh in his face, Harry was stunned when he realized he wasn't the only one who looked battle weary. Remus was pale and tired, and if Harry didn't know better, he would have thought the full moon was soon approaching. His robes were torn more than usual, and like Harry and Neville, they had blood staining them in places. Apparently St. Mungo's wasn't the only place to be attacked that day

"What happened to you?" Harry asked simply. "You alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine, but what about you?" Remus had calmed down some, but was still nervously running his hands though his thinning hair. "After I got your note this morning, I've been trying to find you. It seems like your intuition was right. We managed to confirm that Voldemort had something planned for today, so the Order and Ministry sent out every available person they could afford. Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, the Ministry lobby, and Azkaban were all attacked simultaneously this afternoon. It was through sheer dumb luck and your warning that let us get prepared."

"We managed to capture four Death Eaters at Azkaban before they called off their attacks. Only a few of our people got seriously hurt, and thankfully nobody died. A few people got kissed at Hogsmeade, but it could have been a lot worse. Harry, Dumbledore and the Order have been searching for you for the last hour! I wasn't worried at first, but when I flooed here and no one was home; I panicked! Dumbledore said the best I could do was come back and wait. Then Dobby pops off to nowhere, he won't tell me what's going on, and now you appear looking just as beat up as I feel, and with the Longbottoms to boot! Will one of you tell me please what has happened?"

Harry opened his mouth to explain, but didn't know where to begin. Healer Bosworth had taken care of his shoulder and given him a few potions, but he still had more than one injury left to take care of. He hurt too much right then to even begin to try to explain, and turned to Neville instead.

"Neville, would you mind telling Remus what happened? I've got to take some potions, and I need a bath as well. I'm sore, and I'm dirty, and I'm bloody, and I'm tired. Maybe Remus can help settle in your parents? Dobby and Winky should have some furniture and lodgings set up by now. We can make more permanent changes another day. I think once all that's taken care of, we all need to have a talk. I've a lot of things to explain to both of you. This is going to be a long night."

Leaving both others with their mouths open in protest, Harry walked off to his suite, craving a hot bath. As if the day hadn't been eventful enough, he knew he'd soon have to let his two friends in on some secrets. They had earned his trust, and there wasn't much of a choice anymore.

Author Note:

This chapter is one half of my original Ch. 24, but I decided to split it up as it was so long. At over 59 MS Word pages in 10 pt. type, with almost ten pages of non-stop action, it was just too much to read for most people at one sitting. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised that at 59 pages, and 40,000 words, this is the longest chapter in HP fanfic history! I never claimed to be a brilliant action writer, so I hope I did a good job. Lately everyone's been talking about the action scenes Joe6991 writes, and I know there's no way I can compete with that. His fics are very war-like and action driven though, and mine isn't like that, so I hope you all can accept our differences.

I also hope I fooled a lot of you into thinking I killed Neville! Ha! I laugh in your face! J/K, but let me fill all of you in on what has happened. Some members in my Yahoo! Group were bothering me about posting a new chapter (surprise, huh?), so I decided to have a little fun with them. Days ago I posted a "cookie" of this chapter, which was the action sequence in which Nev died. Needless to say, they were all shocked and outraged that I'd kill off yet another person,

and were begging me to tell them I was just joking around, and that Neville wasn't really dead. Well, I lied out my ass, and told them I was serious. So like I said, ha, joke's on you. That will teach them next time to prod me for a quick update.

Just a few things I want to say. About my short explanation about religion in wizarding culture; I have no idea what I'm writing about. As a non-practicing Jew, the only things I know about Christmas and Christianity are what I've seen in movies, learned from TV, and read in a few books. Likewise, I won't even begin to speculate how religion in the fictional wizarding world begins to work. I just thought the idea of Chris Cringle as a wizard was cute, and could be worked in well. I don't even think I'm the first person to write that, although I can't remember who the others have been. But I don't want to be called a pagan or anything just as silly for writing that wizards have no religious beliefs. Just like most other things I write about, when in doubt I've been writing about my own life. I don't have any strong religious beliefs (God? What God?), so I made Harry and the others not have any either. Just take comfort that it was only a short scene, and won't be a large part of my story. I've read only one fic that I can remember which explored religion in the wizarding world, and it was quite good. So for any interested readers, check out "The Next Dance" by Aerie22 at Schnoogle. It's a sequel to "Let's Dance," and is very good. Lots of fluff and romance, but action and adventure as well. Slow updates, but no author is perfect.

What else? Ah yes...hope I didn't gross anyone out with the joke about Dobby and Winky's sex life, but I thought it too funny to pass up.

Anything else I can remember to say I'll post in my Yahoo! Group, and I'll also be having a live chat there soon. I've also got a new fic "The Best of a Bad Situation" which is being published at It's a short, smutty NC-17 piece I couldn't get out of my head, and I hope a few of you will take a look. I guess it's my way to keep PoT PG13; by writing pure smut somewhere else. That's all for now though, and I hope to make two updates in November.

Oh, and as I've taken to do lately, all review responses to my last chapter are posted in the "files" section of my Yahoo! Group. I think

likes it that way, and so do most of my members. Joining is free and easy, so stop by and take a look. Link is on my bio page; just click on "homepage" to get there. Later!

Ross

## Chapter 25 – Houseguests, Pt. 2

In was almost two hours later, when all three men met at the kitchen table with large bowls of pasta in front of them. Neville had had plenty of time to set up his parents for the night, Remus had been filled in on their adventurous afternoon, and all three had gotten a chance to clean up as well.

Dobby had cooked a quick meal while Winky stayed with the Longbottoms, and there was nothing else to do except come clean and start talking. So Harry began, as much as he was afraid of what his friend's reactions would be.

"You all know this summer I snuck off to Diagon Alley, and bought some things. I was tired of being controlled by people who weren't being honest with me, and I was tired of having the truth hid. Which led of course to me and Professor Dumbledore being at odds, which still needs to be resolved. Well, there's some other stuff I haven't told anyone yet; important things, not all of which are legal. You see, it all started that night in the Department of Mysteries, when I stumbled into a room with experimental objects in it. Remember all the time turners Neville? Well you see, the next day, in my robes I found....."

And so Harry explained much to the surprise and wonderment of the other two exactly what he'd been up to. He explained about how he'd not spent two months during the summer training like he led his friends to believe, but nearly seven. How he had traveled back in time to repeat each week twice, and how he'd done nothing almost every day but exercise, read and run. How he'd found the counter to the Ministry's monitoring spell not only in Knockturn Alley like he'd said, but also in the dank and highly illegal private storeroom beneath Borgin & Burkes' shop. Where he also took an antidote to the potion Dumbledore slipped to all his students, which even Remus wasn't aware of. And then how he'd continued with his training even at Hogwarts, and even repeating each week only once still provided him enough time to devote to his normal studies and activities, and still advance in his training at a swift pace.

Neville took most of the news at face value. He had a few questions about how Harry had found everything he seemingly needed in such

a short time, but after all he'd seen Harry capable of, he didn't question much. Most of what Harry had been doing at school even before he gave away his secrets Neville found incredible, so the extra info didn't surprise him like it might once have.

Harry did have to remove his shirt to show off his guardian tattoos though, as that was something Neville was curious about. Remus had already seen them, but took another view as the opportunity presented itself. Remembering back earlier in the day when Harry had showed Neville the tattoo parlor, Neville smiled as the pieces came together. Harry went on to explain that each tattoo was said to have a specific property, but so far only Prongs had shown his.

"A golden Patronus?" Neville asked. "Wow! If it's really like you said, that's huge Harry! Do you think you could cast it for me so I could see?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry Neville, but I can only cast it when there are real Dementors present. I've tried before in the past, but I could only produce my normal silver patronus."

"But you just said you were practicing before you found out about the Prongs tattoo in Diagon Alley," Neville argued. "I still don't know how you got there though. No one ever saw you leave Halloween, and we were keeping an eye on you. After your scar hurt you earlier that day, we didn't want to leave you alone."

"It was your double, wasn't it?" Remus guessed. "That's why nobody suspected you. There were actually two of you around that night. One at Hogwarts eating dinner, and another helping in Diagon Alley, under your invisibility cloak."

"Yup," Harry smiled. "You finally found me out. It's been the only time so far I've had to leave my trunk when I've repeated a week. At the time I didn't understand why it had to be that way, as my future self was making all the decisions. Later in the week though when I found out about Amber's death, I knew why it had to be that way. So soon after losing her, I would have been too tempted to save her, and that would have risked the timelines. I'm still not sure how using the time tuner will affect things if I play with time like that, so I avoid the

possibility whenever I can. That's why I confine myself to my trunk whenever I'm repeating a week. It worked out for the best though, because my future self knew exactly what had happened, and was waiting to heal all my injuries when I got back."

"So how old are you, really I mean?" Neville asked.

"Legally, I'm still the same age. Sixteen and a half. There's no way to track use of time turners to such a degree that anybody will know for certain how much extra they've aged. Take Hermione for instance. When she used her time turner in third year, she must have repeated some class periods two or three times. Her problem was that she didn't spend any extra time sleeping; she should have done that. But nobody's really sure how much extra she aged, so the Ministry doesn't recognize her as being older."

"It's the same with me, although I've got a pretty good idea of how much I've traveled. I've been repeating the same schedule since I first started using the time tuner, so physically I guess, I'm about one year older than I should be. Everyone thinks my height increase has just been a normal growth spurt, but really it's just been me aging like normal. But because you see me every other week, nobody notices the subtle changes."

"Neville made a good point though, Harry," Remus pointed out. "You tried to reproduce your golden patronus before you made the discovery about Prongs in Diagon Alley that night. Have you tried again now that you know your tattoo has to do with the ability?"

Harry was stumped. "No, I haven't. How could I not have thought of that? I guess knowing that I could use it if real Dementors were present didn't worry me about using it in practice situations."

"Well try now," Neville asked excitedly.

Harry was a little excited himself as he stood from the table, and backed away from the others. With his wand drawn, he concentrated on his shoulder blade, and the tattoo he knew to be there. Then, summoning up all his positive thoughts, he intoned the spell, "Expecto Patronus," and waved his wand towards the lift doors.

Even before Harry incanted his spell, both Remus and Neville saw the Prongs tattoo on Harry's naked torso crawl down his arm towards his wand hand. Then when the spell was said, gold mist poured out the end of Harry's wand, until it formed the familiar shape they'd been expecting. Even Neville had seen Harry's patronus enough times to recognize him, even though he'd never seen him gold before.

The misty stag looked just like he had the other two times Harry and Remus had seen him, and after a short canter around looking for prey, he turned his attention back to Harry, and bowed before dissipating.

Spurred on by his success, Remus insisted Harry try to conjure the spell in a number of other ways. He wanted to know if Harry could produce multiple patroni at once, if he could produce his regular, silver patronus if he still wanted, and he wanted to know if Harry would be willing to try his second wand with the spell.

The multiple patroni didn't work, but Harry was able to call on his regular silver patronus if he consciously asked his tattoo to stay on his shoulder. Casting the spell with Hedwig's wand hadn't occurred to him before though, and Harry was just as excited as the others on what might happen.

"EXPECTO PATRONUS," Harry yelled, brandishing his new wand. Not really knowing what to expect, the three were still shocked and surprised when a fully formed animal leapt right out the end of Harry's wand.

Unlike normally when it would form out of conjured mist, this beast was a spitting image of a real stag, right down to the smallest detail. He was still completely gold, but in much clearer focus than any patronus the others had ever seen before. He was also twice the size, and would probably only look ordinary standing next to Hagrid. The stag's antlers reached ten feet into the air, and Harry counted himself fortunate that his place had vaulted ceilings, otherwise he couldn't imagine what would have happened.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing though was that this Prongs was fully corporeal. Not just a whisp of vapor, Harry could actually

see the substance the creature was made of. And unlike normal patroni that required guidance by their casting wizard, this stag moved about of his own accord, and didn't dissipate after finding no prey. Instead he approached the others to be pet, and Neville was the first to be surprised that he could actually touch the living totem.

"I can feel him! Harry, he's real!"

Harry was too flabbergasted to worry about what he'd do with a ten foot wild stag in his home at the moment, and Remus was continually circling the creature, taking all sorts of readings with his wand. He too reached out to touch the stag to make sure Neville wasn't exaggerating, and then withdrew suddenly as if finally realizing the implications of it all. If he was impressed and astonished before when Harry managed the golden spell with his original wand, the thoughts running through his mind now were multiplied by a factor of ten.

After some more silent minutes, the stag finally bowed to Harry and dissipated. Turned into vapor like all his kind, the fact that he lasted almost five minutes under his own power was still impressive.

Harry put his shirt back on while the others all gathered their thoughts, and then they all retook their seats at the kitchen table as Harry's story continued. The lifelike, huge golden patronus was just chalked up to another of Harry's important discoveries.

Back in storytelling mode, Harry continued to fill his friends in on how he'd been training. As the story moved away from facts that Remus already knew, he became concerned when hearing that Harry had been dueling himself, and in fact using the Cruciatus almost daily. Neville turned green at the thought, but Harry assured them he had started slowly and worked his way to longer times; to try and build up a tolerance. It had worked somewhat, as he was able to throw the curse off with near one hundred percent success now. Remus was both impressed and revolted with the news, and Neville choose to remain silent. He didn't know how he felt about Harry training himself against the Unforgiveable, and didn't want to speculate. Both Remus and Neville however couldn't ignore that Harry had done what no other wizard had before, nor were many even willing to try.

Finally the two had been filled in with every detail Harry thought was important, save one. Already he was keeping too many secrets from too many people, so he vowed to just tell these two everything; to get it off his chest. The different levels of information Harry had told many of his other friends and professors were getting harder to keep straight in his head, and the less worry he had, the better Harry thought he'd be.

And when it was finally over with, Neville got to ask the question he'd been wanting to ask since the fight at St. Mungo's had ended.

"But Harry, where did those Death Eaters really go off to? You stunned them; I saw you; and there's no way they up and escaped like you claimed they had."

"Well Neville," Remus explained like the scholar he was, "it is possible to overcome a stunning spell with enough training. Just like Harry's been building a tolerance with Crucio, if someone gets stunned enough times, their body learns to fight the effects. Or they could have used a form of protection, like Harry's dragon-hide vest. And if even one of the Death Eaters became conscious, he could have revived the rest of them, and been away before Harry even realized."

"No he couldn't Remus," Neville smirked back. "Harry used the personal stunner he's been working on. I didn't hear the incantation, but the navy blue light gave it away. So unless Harry Enervates them himself, there's no way they could wake up on their own."

Turning to Harry, Remus asked, "You finished it? Why didn't you say so?"

"Sorry," Harry answered. "With everything else that's been happening, it must have slipped my mind. I actually finished the spell alterations weeks ago, but didn't get the chance to use it until now. Neville offered earlier in the week, but I wasn't sure. At least now I know it works."

"Show him Harry," Neville said while standing up. "I can also tell you if it feels any different from a regular stunner. Merlin knows I've been hit with those enough times."

"Are you sure Neville? I can just as easily show Remus on someone else?"

"I'm sure," he confirmed. "Just do it quick before I loose my nerve."

So Harry stunned Neville, and then quickly revived him after Remus was unable too. When Neville was fully aware, he told them that at least from his perspective, he didn't notice a difference. Then Neville suggested they try again using Harry's other wand. This time however Harry vetoed the idea. His other wand was much too unpredictable with spells he wasn't proficient at, and the personal stunner was still too new. Harry did remember that he used it on three of the Death Eaters though, and besides some extra power, it had looked the same.

"What's that incantation about though, Harry?" Remus asked. "Stubefy? It sounds more like you sneezed than you cursed someone."

"Harry," Neville was beginning to blush, no doubt due to embarrassment. "You didn't really, did you?" Because Harry's spell had acted so fast, Neville hadn't heard the incantation when he got stunned.

Harry had to laugh at Neville's situation. "Well, I needed some way to differentiate between the spells Neville, and your mispronunciation was just as good as any. Actually it was the first thing that came to mind, and I couldn't get it out of my head. Hope you don't mind?"

"Um, guys," Remus inquired, "what the heck are you talking about?" It took a little while longer for Neville to recover after Remus was told the whole story about Neville's broken nose and failed attempts at the spell.

"So where did those Death Eaters go then?" Remus asked. "You've been avoiding the issue Harry. We know they didn't escape like you said." Remus swallowed nervously as he considered the possibilities.

"You didn't kill them, did you?" Remus hated to even think it, but if Harry was so willing to use one of the Unforgivables (even if it was only on his self), what was to stop him from using others?

"Don't be absurd," Neville came to Harry's defense. "That would make Harry no better than they are, and he'd never sink that low. What did you do with them Harry?"

"They're in my pocket!" Harry answered jovially. He wasn't upset for Remus thinking so badly about him, but Harry did feel a smug satisfaction at the gob-smacked look on his mentor's face.

Harry let the two ponder the answer for a good half minute, before he had to laugh in their faces, and brought out his trunk. "Come on in, I'll show you."

Opening his trunk to the third compartment, Harry ushered them inside. For his next bit of news, Harry knew seeing it would be much more believable than hearing it.

After a quick tour for Remus's sake (who had known about the trunk, but hadn't yet gotten a chance to look inside), Harry placed his hand on the magical portal in his living quarters, and opened the last compartment. So far Remus had been impressed, but with everything else he'd seen and heard that day, wasn't overly shocked. Stepping into the next compartment though, blew everything else he'd been explained out of the water. For there, lying in a heap at the bottom of a ladder, were none other than the five missing Death Eaters, still unconscious.

"Cool Harry!" Neville cheered.

"Harry, how? What?" Remus wasn't making any sense. He almost ran forward to the fallen men, but once remembering who they were, fell back behind the others. Then when he remembered they were all stunned, pushed Harry and Neville out of the way to inspect them.

"Harry! That's the Lestrange Brothers, and Matt Blaycock! These are dangerous men! I don't know who the other two are, but how on earth...."

"One of the others is Pansy Parkinson's older brother," Harry interrupted him. "I don't know who the last one is, but I don't think he's too high ranking. Rodolphus Lestrange was in charge, and I'll bet he'll have the most information to give up."

"Information?" Neville asked.

"Let's just say these aren't the first Death Eaters to have visited my trunk. Follow me, and I'll explain everything."

So each levitating at least one of the men, Harry led the group towards the back of the large room, where twenty small cells were built against two walls of a corner. Harry directed them to the leftmost wall, as he knew the other ten cells were all currently occupied.

"This is my last big secret, I swear," Harry informed the others. "This is the whole reason why I've been training so hard; Death Eaters. And while I didn't plan on them ambushing us today, I'm not sorry it happened. These five will make a nice addition to my collection."

"Collection?" Remus was almost afraid to ask.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Collection of prisoners." Then without another word, but a wave of his wand, all the cells doors turned transparent, and Neville and Remus almost fell down in shock at seeing so many other obvious Death Eaters already jailed.

"Wicked," Neville again cheered with a look of incredulity on his face.

"What the bloody hell have you been doing?" Remus screamed. "If Dumbledore or the Ministry knew what was going on here, you'd be thrown in one of those cells yourself!"

"Like I said," Harry coolly replied, "not everything I've been doing is legal. But trust me when I say that all these men are guilty of heinous

crimes, and deserve to be locked up. I would have turned them over to the Ministry already, but as we've seen, Azkaban's not secure. If they got sent there, they'd be out serving Voldemort again in a matter of weeks. The only reason why this is such a successful prison is that only I have access to it as of now, and no one else knows about it. Even if the Death Eaters managed to escape from their cells, they don't have any wands to do magic with, and they couldn't get out of the trunk without me opening the lid."

It took a little while longer to calm mostly Remus down, but Harry explained how he'd gone out to Diagon Alley one day, and had stumbled across his first prisoner; Sean Hazelton. From there, things had kind of snowballed. Information that one Death Eater gave up would be used to capture another, and so on and so one. And before he knew it, Harry now had fifteen Death Eaters all locked in separate cells; not knowing the fate of the others.

"But why you, Harry?" Neville asked. "I mean, I'm really impressed with all you've done and everything, but you still haven't said why you're leaving school to take such huge risks. Wouldn't it be safer to let the Order and the Ministry handle all this? You could still live in your new home and be in control of your own life without going out to capture Death Eaters."

"It's the prophecy, isn't it?" Remus guessed. Harry had let him in on the first part of the prophecy too, but neither Remus nor anyone else besides Dumbledore knew what the second half said.

"Oh," Neville suddenly realized, "right. I forgot about that. I don't know if you should tell us Harry. The way you talked about the prophecy, you made it sound really important. I think the less people who know what it says, the better."

Harry smiled sadly. "That's exactly why I don't mind telling you, Neville; you too Remus. You've both earned my trust this year, and I know if I tell you, you won't give away my secrets."

"You'd tell me, and not even Hermione and Ron?" Neville wondered.

"Ron and Hermione are the best friends I could ask for Neville," Harry assured him, "but sometimes they care too much about me. Even if it means betraying my confidence, they'd both share the prophecy with another if they thought they were helping me. Or at least, I think they would. Maybe in the future I'll be able to tell them, but I don't feel comfortable right now. You know how jealous Ron gets. If he and I got in another fight, he might let anything slip just to get even with me. And Hermione? Well, let's just say that she puts too much confidence in authority. I think of all my friends, she's the most uneasy about the fights me and Professor Dumbledore have been having. Even Ginny and Luna would handle the information better, I think. Funny really, that my oldest and best friends are the least trustworthy. But I know it's only because they care. They just need more time to accept that I'm my own person, and there's no way I'm not going to be fighting Voldemort again."

"Is that what the prophecy says, Harry?" Remus asked nervously.  
"That you and Voldemort have to fight again?"

"It says more than just that," Harry admitted. "Basically, it says that in the end, it comes down to just us two. One of us will kill the other, and only then can the victor get on with his life. That's why I can't hide or pretend like I won't face him again. So I've decided to get ready, and do all I can to weaken him. The less Death Eaters he has supporting him, the less power he holds."

Pausing to let what he said sink in some, Harry took a deep breath and repeated the prophecy start to finish.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

Harry left off the ending that just repeated the beginning lines, as that had always just annoyed him. Still, that didn't lessen the bombshell any, and Harry let Remus and Neville ponder what they'd heard before moving on. No more talk about the prophecy was mentioned

that night, and a silent agreement was understood that none of them would mention it to anyone besides themselves.

"So about the information you were talking about?" Neville brought up again.

And with that, the three men had moved past any uncomfortable silences onto other topics. Harry explained how in his Potions study he'd learned to brew Veritaserum, and how he'd been interrogating his captives for more information. That was how he'd come up with the list of names he'd passed on to Remus, and how he knew where to find other Death Eaters, as well as security details for their homes and their habits and schedules.

Harry also took the time explaining in detail all he'd learnt about the V line of vaults, and how they'd been set up years earlier by Voldemort in his youth. It was through these vaults (entrusted to most of his Death Eaters) that he managed to live and pay for his needs. Harry thought it would be a good idea to take away as much of Voldemort's assets as he could, so that's why he'd been emptying the V vaults of his captors.

Again Remus had a problem with Harry stealing money and using it for his own benefit, but Harry reassured him with the fact that the money was being kept separate from his own finances, and that he hadn't spent a single knut of it. It wasn't his intention to rob the Death Eaters; only to make them nervous and put pressure on Voldemort's finances. Harry had every intention of handing over all the money he'd taken when he turned the Death Eaters to the proper authorities. Let the Ministry return the money, or keep it themselves; he didn't care. But until he was confident that Azkaban or another suitable prison was secure enough, he'd hold onto it for now.

Neville didn't mind that Harry had taken the money, but he was concerned that the transactions could be traced and Harry would get in trouble. Again, Harry had to remind himself that Neville had led a sheltered childhood, and that goblin law was very different from what he was used to.

Remus confirmed Harry's actions. To the goblins' eyes, all the transactions were legal, and therefore wouldn't be contested by them. If Avery or any of the others were to show up in person claiming they'd been impersonated, that was another matter, but that wouldn't happen. Harry had them under tight lock and key, and hopefully they'd stay that way until moved to a permanent prison. And even if Avery's wife or relatives wanted to contest the withdrawals, they couldn't without his witness. Therefore, until Avery showed up in person, to the outside world it looked like he had simply taken the money and run.

Not even Voldemort as original creator of the V line of vaults could interfere with transactions in and out of them. He could make his own, yes, but couldn't stop someone else from emptying an account. When he had set up the vaults, he never considered the fact a vigilante group or person would capture his Death Eaters, and unlawfully empty their accounts. Dumbledore and the Ministry would never do such a thing, the goblins wouldn't dare steal from him, so he'd thought his system was perfect. Through use of many vials of Veritaserum Harry had discovered the flaw, and after hearing the lengthy explanation, Neville understood that Harry was safe.

Remus was interested to witness Harry interrogate the men, but it was too late at night for that, and all of them needed sleep after their long day. Harry promised he'd wait for Remus, but until then, settled for locking the new Death Eaters into empty cells. All wands, magical objects, and extra clothing had been removed as Harry had made routine, and they'd only been woken up once secured and locked in. Blaycock and Rabastan Lestrange revived from Harry's Enervate spell no problem; except that they though they were just about to attack a hospital ward, and it took each of them a moment to realize things must had gone very wrong.

Rodolphus Lestrange, Chris Parkison, and the fifth man however didn't wake when Harry tried to revive them. Remus and Neville tried too, but even after Harry's forth try at "Enervate," they remained unconscious.

After some worry and speculation, it was Harry that finally remembered that he'd cursed those three with his second wand, and

the extra power must not have let his original work in reviving them. And indeed it was the problem, as after he pulled Hedwig's wand from his spare holster, all three men woke up without further complications. It was just another quirk of Harry's wand and abilities, and one that he made a mental note to explore further in the future.

It wasn't even ten when all three friends said goodnight, and retired to their rooms. Remus had taken his customart bedroom, but Neville had moved all his things to his parents' new quarters earlier in the afternoon. The empty flat had two small bedrooms inside, and he much preferred being closer to his parents, even if he sacrificed some luxuries. Later in the week Harry promised him that they'd decorate the space properly, and that was good enough for now for them both.

And so once again in his own bed, not even attempting to deal with his Occlumency exercises after such an eventful day, Harry drifted off to sleep sore and injured, but very satisfied.

"CRUCIO!"

Two men and a woman screamed as their master, Lord Voldemort, took his anger out on them. What was supposed to be victory celebration for their successful string of attacks had instead turned into a mass torture session. Four of their numbers had been captured, another seven weren't answering their summons or were missing, and the Death Eaters that had arrived at Voldemort's secret lair had only succeeded in causing little damage and destruction. No mudbloods or muggles had been killed like ordered that afternoon, and if not for the Dementors kissing nine victims, the day would have been a total defeat.

Lifting the curse after two whole minutes, Voldemort eyed the men before him with pure venom beatin through his heart. He was not one for failure, and lately that was all his trusted servants seemed to report.

"Bellatrix! Lucius! Dolohov! Why do you force me to me to punish you? Why do you fail your Lord, when all he asks is the simple task of killing a few dirty mudbloods who aren't even capable of protecting

themselves? We had an orchestrated plan of attack arranged for today. Four simultaneous attacks to distract aurors away from Rodolphus's attempt to abduct young Potter from St. Mungo's. It was brilliant, and yet you all failed. Tell me, why has my plan unsuccessful?"

None of the Death Eaters wanted to answer, but luckily only three were being questioned at the moment. Bellatrix Lestrange, Lucius Malfoy, and Antonin Dolohov were the three highest ranking Death Eaters in attendance at the meeting, and had also been left in charge of three of the four attacks made earlier that day. The fourth leader, Mulciber, was caught at Azkaban with three of his team, and currently being held in Ministry holding cells awaiting his trial. Somehow, even Malfoy envied the man right now, as he was at least safe from Voldemort's wrath.

The last time Malfoy had taken initiative and answered his Lord's question, he'd been punished anyway on a whim. He knew the same would happen again this time, and most likely be even more painful than before. Never had he seen his master so angry, and he was shamed to admit his fear, if only to himself. Luckily Bellatrix Lestrange wasn't half sane, and answered Voldemort on behalf of the team leaders. Her claims of there being a traitor in their midst didn't please him though, and she was cursed into unconsciousness for her efforts.

"Since the traitor Snape managed to escape my wrath, you know I've not allowed another of his kind among my fold. So don't speak to me about a spy! Lucius....tell me, what really happened today?"

"Damn," Malfoy sword under his breath. Behind his mask he was afforded such small luxuries. But Voldemort was expecting an answer, and he had no choice but to tell the truth. Even a single small lie could get him killed.

"My Lord, I have no proof of a spy like Lestrange has claimed. However, the Ministry aurors and Dumbledore's men were clearly on alert when we arrived to attack by portkey, and their numbers were not what we'd been expecting. In Hogsmeade alone, there were thirty men on patrol when there should only have been five. With only sixteen under my control, we were no match against their larger

number. The townspeople too joined in once the fight had started, and only after the Dementors showed did they retreat to their homes. I don't know how Dumbledore found out about our attack today, but he must have somehow. No loner with the element of surprise, or superior numbers, I felt it best to retreat when my men started to loose ground. I cannot speak for Bellatrix and Antonin, but I'd guess they felt the same."

"And what of Mulciber's capture, and Rodolphus's team at St. Mungo's?"

"I'm not sure, my lord," Lucius answered nervously. "Mulciber was captured at Azkaban, though I have no details on how at this time. Our spies inside the Ministry have all recently been found out or aren't talking; something that I've reported to you before. As for Rodolphus's attempt on Potter, I've heard it's failed."

Voldemort's red eyes twitched at the news, but otherwise he remained silent. Talking that as his signal to continue, Lucius Malfoy returned to his report.

"Ministry aurors were called to the scene by St. Mungo's security guards," he said, "which interviewed Potter right after the attack. Potter claimed that he and the Longbottom boy managed to fight off Rodolphus's initial attack, and the Death Eaters portkeyed out before the guards could arrive. If Rodolphus and his team are hurt, it is possible that they've retreated to a hidden location to tend to their injuries. I'm sure they've not ignored your summons intentionally master."

"Do not presume to know the intentions of others, Lucius," Voldemort whispered coldly. "Already you have been charged with finding Avery and the others who've gone missing. For your sake, I hope Rodolphus and his team have not joined with them. I do not tolerate deserters Lucius, and I'm beginning to loose patience with your excuses."

"Yes, my Lord." Lucius knew when to cut his losses. Any further arguing would be a sign of weakness.

"We will wait another two days to hear from Rodolphus and his men, and I hope your speculations prove true. Rodolphus has remained one of my most loyal Death Eaters over the years, and I refuse to believe he would abandon us now. But if he has," Voldemort paused and hissed a threat to Nagini that made Lucius's skin crawl. "If he has, he'll wish I never freed him from Azkaban at all, and left him to rot."

"Very well my Lord. Any other commands?"

"What progress have you made in tracking down the deserters since our last meeting?" To emphasize his point, Voldemort leveled his wand in a threatening manner. "And Lucius, do not exaggerate your failings."

Glad that his face was hidden behind a mask, Lucius drew up every ounce of Malfoy nerve just so he sounded normal.

"There's no news to exaggerate, my Lord. I've contacted every sympathetic ear in the British Isles, and even a few of our allies abroad. Not one person has seen or heard from Avery, Goyle, Crabbe, the Parkers, or the others. It's as if they just walked off the face of the earth, my Lord. If I had to guess, I'd say they're either dead or living among the muggles." Lucius shuddered at the thought, and his disgust showed through the mask.

"Then that shall be the next place you look, Lucius. You shall not rest until you find them. If they have died, then they'll be honored as they have died well in the service of their master. And if they've run, then they must be made an example of. We may be made to rule this world Lucius, but muggles still have their uses. It is easy to hide amongst sheep, if you desire to blend in. So if you must visit the muggle world to rule out the possibility, then I expect you to be just as thorough as you'd normally be. When we next meet Lucius, you best have some news to report."

"Very well Lucius, you may go. But do send in some of the new recruits. My temper is starting to flare again, and I need something to curse."

Lucius Malfoy left Voldemort's throne chambers as quickly as possible after being dismissed. Five unfortunate souls got sent in for an undeserved lesson in pain, but as long as it wasn't him, Lucius didn't care. While his master had spoken calmly for most of his meeting, underneath it all, Lucius knew he was brimming with anger. Yet again he'd made an attempt to capture Harry Potter, and yet again he had failed. It made him look foolish and weak in front of his subordinates, and that was something that Lucius was starting to heavily dislike. The more angry and upset Voldemort got, the more his troops suffered for it. Lucius knew he had better find out some information on the missing Death Eaters, or next time he wouldn't be asked to send new recruits in the room after him. Next time they met; Lucius would have to pay himself!

The next morning when Harry woke up, he was still sore and tired, but overall very pleased with himself. He'd been witness to part's of Voldemort's meeting the night before, but for some reason it lacked the vivid clarity his visions had had lately. Harry wondered if it was because of his injury or his lack of Occlumency practice. Remembering that he'd been injured around Halloween as well, he thought Occlumency the most likely answer.

By not practicing his exercises before going to bed, Harry wasn't as in touch with his own mind as he normally was. And while the short reprieve from the tedious exercises was enjoyable, Harry realized that it of course had its down sides after all. He was less aware of outside intruding forces in his mind, and if he were to come under a direct Legilimency attack, he'd be unable to prevent the attacker from seeing his memories from the past two weeks. Ever since he stopped practicing, all his days' events were automatically sorted in his outside mind sphere. And because while setting up a physical representation of his mind, Harry had ignored that set of shields, but instead worked on strengthening his inside set, there was no way Harry could guarantee that he could fight off an attack. Hesitantly, Harry knew that the experiment had run its course, and Harry had better spend the next night going over all that had happened to him the past two weeks. Before his meeting with Dumbledore the next day, Harry wanted to make sure his mind was in proper order, in case the old coot wanted to try something.

After a quick shower and dressing in comfortable jeans and a jumper, Harry made his way to the kitchen where already Dobby and Winky had every inch of counter space covered in mixing bowls, serving platters, cutting boards, and mountains of food. They had done most of the prep work ahead of time, but left all the cooking to be done that morning. Harry wasn't expecting the Weasleys and Grangers till about noon, and the meal wouldn't be until four or so. Looking at his watch, Harry saw that the elves had a little under seven hours to get everything ready.

Normally a meal with seven hours of cook time, not to mention a week of preparation, wouldn't even phase an elf, let alone two. But Harry had heard their proposed menu, and even with the time they had, he thought it might be a close call. Cooking for the Weasleys meant they had to cook practically double what a normal person would eat. Remus also had a voracious appetite as a werewolf, as he could pack enough away for three people as well. Harry knew the Grangers were both dentists, and might not partake in the desserts, but he had no clue about their normal eating habits. Most likely they'd be like Hermione, and chose a light but balanced selection. Harry had only met them briefly once before his second year, and of all the guests, was looking forward to getting to know them better.

And as much as he tried to deny it, Harry was also excited to see one other specific person; Ginny. He'd worked hard on choosing a gift for her, and thought she'd love it. The thought of bringing a smile to her face warmed Harry as well, and before he could wonder why too much, he switched focus to the other Weasleys.

Fred and George were always a hoot to have around; Harry just wanted to make sure they behaved themselves. In the past during large meals they were always a handful, and always managed to prank someone at the table with one of their inventions. Harry didn't mind a little harmless fun, but he didn't want Neville to get picked on (he'd always been a favorite test subject for them), or his house to be destroyed. No offense to the Weasleys or anything, but he'd taken a lot of pride in making every single piece of furniture, and doing his own decoration. If the Weasley twins thought they'd be able to have free reign in his home, and turn it to look like the Burrow (with its crooked walls and lopsided roof), they had another thing coming.

Ron was just Ron, and Harry knew he'd enjoy his best friend's company no matter what. He was especially looking forward to showing Ron the telly and muggle room. Games had always been a big part of Ron's life, and for once, Harry thought he might have the upper hand when playing against him. Ron would no doubt also find interest in the Christmas tree, or rather its decorations. Besides the ornaments and lights, Harry had hung plenty of candy canes in different colors and flavors. Once Ron discovered those, Harry thought he might eat every last one.

Mrs. Weasley would no doubt want to help with the cooking and cleaning, but Harry already promised himself that he wouldn't let her. He'd gone into town days before and had stocked up his bar for the first time. It was all muggle beverages and alcohol except for the keg of butterbeer, but it would get the job done. And even if he had to serve Mrs. Weasley more brandy than his Aunt Marge drank, he'd get her to relax somehow or another.

And of course Mr. Weasley would be trying to disassemble his home; fascinated with all the muggle appliances. Harry wondered if he'd ever even been in a muggle home before, and seen some of the things everyone else took for granted. With his huge collection of plugs, did he even know they needed to be plugged into an outlet? Well, Harry planned to show him, but also keep an eye out. The last thing he needed was for an eccentric wizard to rewire his home.

"Morning Harry," Neville greeted him at the table. "The elves weren't even offering to cook some breakfast this morning, and I don't want to get in their way, so I just had some cereal. I think there's some left in the pantry."

"Thanks, Nev. Cereal sounds fine. Honestly, I was thinking about skipping breakfast all together today. Merlin knows that's the only way I'd manage to keep up with Ron tonight. Know where Remus is at?"

"Remus went out for a bit, but said he'll be back before noon. Something about a short Order meeting about the attacks yesterday."

“Thanks.” With a quick look to the pantry; blocked by one of Winky’s culinary creations; Harry decided to forgo the cereal and just wait for the main meal. He still had a few more things to do before collecting his guests, and wanted to make sure he had it all ready.

All the rooms had been cleaned the night before, but Harry had to mop up some dried blood on the floor of his bathroom as the elves were currently occupied. Harry also made sure that anything he’d left out that he didn’t want the others to see got packed away in his trunk. His pensieve for instance, which normally was left out on a library study table, would be asking too much restraint from some of the Weasleys. Remus and Neville had respected his privacy, but dealing with the red headed family wasn’t the same. Even Harry himself had taken a look at Snape’s memories without permission, and would be tempted to look at a friend’s if a pensieve was just left lying around. Funny really, that Harry could trust Neville and Remus more than he would even trust himself.

A few potions vials were left out as well from the night before, and Harry hid those while taking another batch to deal with any lingering pain. His shoulder was completely mobile, but did ache when he stretched it above his head. The hole in his leg (the icicle had pierced his dragon-hide pants, but had been slowed down by it) was healed, but had left a small scar. Another few days and a restorative potion would erase that though. And the cut on his arm had been closed shut by just a few of Hedwig’s tears. Made by a cutting curse, it didn’t leave any magical residue behind, and therefore was able to heal right away.

The only injuries he had really been worried about were those to his face and torso, suffered from the physical beating he took. If any of his injuries still showed, then the Weasleys would know something had happened. His ribs were still tender from their assault, but Hedwig had gotten rid of his black eyes and split lip nicely. His nose had been set back in place after being broken, and only a medical professional would see any difference. Harry thought he might have a slight bump in remembrance of the past day, but worse things could have happened.

The last thing he really had to do was set up portkeys for the Weasleys and Grangers, and finish wrapping his gifts. Weeks ago when setting up the visit, the Weasleys had suggested holding off on exchanging gifts with each other until they met. Ron had been against it naturally ("You mean I have to wait a whole extra day?"), but everyone else didn't mind. Hermione had agreed as well, and Neville and Harry were easy to convince. Harry would have to wait even longer for some other ones. Because of the wards on his home, any gift Hagrid or someone else might send wouldn't be able to find him. They'd most likely be waiting for him once he returned to Hogwarts, and Harry knew he'd have some explaining to do. He'd gotten some gifts for some of the D.A. members and fellow Gryffindors, and suspected he might get some gifts in return. He only hoped people wouldn't be too terribly upset by not being able to reach him.

The portkeys wouldn't take long to create; and Harry had already conjured what they'd be made out of; so Harry gathered his gifts from his closet, and made his way to the muggle room where there was a nice wide table he could use. Harry may not be any good at billiards, but at least the pool table would be useful.

"Hey Harry, wrapping gifts too?" Apparently Neville had similar ideas, and was using the ping pong table as his workspace. Both boys had seen what they'd gotten their other friends already, so Harry wasn't worried about seeing something he shouldn't. He had personally wrapped Neville's gift days ago, and it was already under the tree. Hopefully Neville had done the same.

"Yeah Neville. Just haven't had time enough these past few days. I've only got a few left though. Mr. Weasley's gifts can't be wrapped, and you already know that Ginny's can't be either. Yours I did days ago, and the Grangers are already taken care of. That only leaves Ron and the twins."

"Did you get any gifts for anyone else this year?" Neville asked.

"Well," Harry said, "I did get Luna something nice, and a small something for a lot of the D.A. members. I got Seamus these cool muggle candies with rum in the middle, and I got Dean some team rugby shirts. I hope they like them. Lav and Parvati I had no idea

what to get, so I just bought them gift certificates to Gladrags. They should be pleased though. And something for Hagrid of course, but that's about it."

"Sounds like everyone, mate," Neville replied. "I sent some extras out as well. You know, I think I'll have more gifts this year than any other before. It's my happiest Christmas too. I've got my parents with me, and more friends than I ever thought I'd have. I really appreciate all you've done for me this year Harry."

Harry was smiling, but getting uncomfortable. Neville had been thanking him incessantly since the offer to let his parents live with them. It was getting a little old.

"No worried, Nev. You deserve to be happy; more than most people do. I'm just glad I get to see it. Now how about we finish up here, and then some last minute decorating? I looked up some new charms we could use that sound like fun."

"Cool!"

And so each boy finished wrapping the few gifts they had left to do, and placed them under the tree together. There were already over thirty gifts there, and with the addition the Weasleys and Grangers would make, Harry wondered if they even had enough room.

The new charms Harry had learned were quick and simple to perform, and only took ten minutes to cast about the Hideaway. One charm frosted the insulated windows which normally wouldn't frost over, and another one conjured snow in the living room area. The magical snow looked very nice, and added a lot to the holiday cheer, yet didn't make the floors cold or wet. The magic prevented the snow from melting, and once the charm had run for fifteen minutes, all the snow disappeared and didn't leave a trace. Harry had just wanted to test the charm before the Weasleys arrived, and thought it would be a nice touch while opening gifts.

After that, there was only one hour left until Harry had to be on his way, and he mostly just bothered Dobby and Winky in the kitchen; trying to lend a hand. Neville had decided to spend the time with his

parents, and Reums had returned back only minutes before Harry was getting ready to leave. He had done some last minute shopping himself, and had a huge wrapped package in his hands that he tried hiding behind his back from Harry. That alone tempted him to use his x-ray vision to see through the wrapping paper (Remus had really been impressed that Harry had a magical lens), but in the end he managed to restrain himself. Still, Remus took no chances, and didn't place the obvious gift under the tree. Instead it went with him to his bedroom, and when he returned, Remus refused to give a single hint about what it was, or who it was for.

Remus wanted to get a quick shower in before the guests arrived, so left Harry to himself in the entry hall. Harry didn't mind though, and after one last look around, collected his made portkeys and stepped towards the fireplace.

Grabbing a pinch of floo powder from the humidor Harry kept it in, he called out "The Burrow," and stepped inside. Green flames wrapped themselves around him, and a moment later, Harry landed gracefully in the Burrow's kitchen. Once again, he'd managed to stay standing. Not that it mattered though, for an instant after he arrived, Molly Weasley enveloped him in a smothering hug.

"Oh Harry, how wonderful to see you! Happy Christmas! How have your holidays been so far?"

"Great Mrs. Weasley," Harry managed to get out. "Neville and I have been having a grand time together, but we couldn't wait until today came. I've been looking forward to this for months."

"So have we, dear. Ever since we learned you were living on your own, I've been stricken with worry about how you've been taking care of yourself. I just hope you've had enough sense to eat proper meals and do some cleaning. Living like a bachelor might be fun, but it's no way to run a household."

"You mean Ron hasn't told you about Dobby and Winky?" Harry asked, surprised. "I've had two house-elves living with me since before I even moved to my new home. They take very good care of

me, and you'll get the chance to meet them later. I'm sure you'll approve."

"Really? House-elves? I wonder why Ron hasn't said anything? Well, everyone else is in the living room, so why don't we join them. Do we have time for a quick snack or cup of tea before we leave?"

Looking at his watch, Harry already knew he preferred to move along as quickly as possible. "I don't think so Mrs. Weasley. I told Hermione she could expect me to gather her and her parents soon, and I'd rather be early than late. Knowing Ron and the twins, we'll be cutting it close as it is. We better get everyone together."

"Alright then. You go find everyone, and I'll be along shortly. Arthur's fiddling in his tool shed, and I'll go get him. We'll meet you back here in the kitchen."

Mrs. Weasley made right for the kitchen door, so Harry led himself through the short hall into the Burrow's large living room. Ron and Ginny were playing a game of chess on the couch, and the twins were huddled together in a back corner riffling through a bag of sweets. Harry smiled as they were the first ones to notice him.

"Harry old chum! How smashing to see you. Looking dashing as always, don't you agree Ginny? How have you been?"

The twins had spoken so fast, that Harry just barely managed to understand that they greeted him, and he returned a hello. Ron and Ginny smiled and waved from the couch, but didn't get up as they were both immersed in the game.

"Don't interrupt them just yet Harry," he thought Fred said to him.

The other twin continued. "Ginny's come very close to beating Ron, and we've got money on the game. Want to place any wagers?"

Taking a look at the board, Harry knew that Ron was in trouble. He'd already lost his queen and half his pawns, not to mention a rook and both bishops. Ginny had lost both her bishops as well, and a knight, but otherwise still had all her important pieces. Harry couldn't see any

type of plan or trap laid out, but he wasn't very good at chess. Still, based on their pieces alone, it would be hard for Ron to make a come back and win.

"I'll put two galleons on Ginny," Harry told the twins.

Ginny giggled from the couch, while Ron blustered and shot an angry look at Harry.

"Hey," he yelled, "you're supposed to be supporting me; you're my best mate!"

"Sorry Ron," Harry teased, "but it looks like Ginny's got you beat this time."

"You bet your arse I do," Ginny mumbled. Then she made another move, which caused her to smile and Ron to grimace, and their attention was suddenly back on the game.

"All ready to leave? Got all your things?" Harry was talking to the twins again, who had come over from the corner to entertain their guest.

"Yeah, Mum made us get ready last night. Something about not wanting to be late. Don't know what she was talking about, though? I mean, it's only you we're going to see. Not like you'll care if we don't leave right on time."

"Actually, I'm glad your mum got you ready," Harry said, "because we do have to leave on time. We've got to pick up Hermione and her parents in about ten minutes, and you know how Hermione is about punctuality."

George laughed at the thought, and did a very Hermione-like impression with a high pitched voice. "Ronald Weasley! You stop playing chess this instant and go get your bags. Honestly! If you have so much free time, you should be spending it doing your homework. We're going to be late now!"

"Not now, 'Mione," Ron grumbled. Ginny laughed at him, and only then did he turn to look at George, and realize his mistake. "George, quit playing games. Don't scare me like that. I'm trying to concentrate over here!"

""You're the one playing games, dear brother of ours," Fred said.

Anymore bickering was stopped though as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley joined them in the living room. They were both dressed in heavy cloaks, as if they expected they'd need to walk outside in the weather.

"You won't need your cloaks, Mrs. Weasley. We can go right to Hermione's from here."

"Ahh, alright I suppose," she said, as she and her husband removed their cloaks. "Are you sure though Harry? I'd hate to be caught out in the cold without my cloak."

"I'm sure. Is this everybody then? We'd better leave soon."

"Who else did you expect?" Ron asked from the couch.

Ginny though, obviously knowing what Harry was thinking, answered his questions. "Bill and Charlie both visited yesterday, but couldn't stay, as they had to get back to work. And as for Percy, well..."

"Percy was invited home for the holidays, but chose to spend it with the Clearwaters instead." Mr. Weasley sounded uncharacteristically harsh when he said that, and Harry looked around the room at everyone else's faces. Only Ginny met his gaze, and she mouthed the word "later" to him.

"Well then, I guess we can leave," Harry broke the silence.

"Can't it wait, Harry?" Ginny asked. "If we leave now, I won't get to beat Ron."

"Why don't you just leave the board for later?" Harry wondered.

Ron laughed at that one. “You can’t do that, Harry! Left unattended, the pieces would destroy each other. Whoever heard of leaving a chess game unfinished? But if there’s no time, I guess we’ll just have to call it a draw. Too bad Ginny; better luck next time!”

“Ron, stop teasing your sister,” Mrs. Weasley admonished. She wasn’t even looking their way, but instead checking through a large group of bags that had been packed and set against a wall. Ron and Ginny must fight so much, that she was just used to intervening.

“Why not just count up the points?” Harry asked. Ginny looked perplexed, and Harry winked at her to let her know he was on her side.

“What points?” Ron inquired.

“Well,” Harry explained, “with muggle chess, the pieces don’t move, so it’s not uncommon to leave games unfinished. In fact sometimes, people can go days or weeks while still playing the same game. They work out each and every possible move before making a decision. But sometimes there’s timed tournaments, where people don’t get to finish a game. In those cases, the judges just count up points to see who wins. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it.”

“Play the same game of chess for weeks? Trust muggles to go and ruin a perfectly good game.”

“Hey Malfoy,” Harry was disappointed in his friend, “I’d keep quiet if I were you. Muggles invented chess as you know, and I bet in their opinion it’s wizards who have messed with it. Moving pieces and all take some skill out of the game. That’s why I like my muggle set so much more.”

“Sorry Harry;” Ron said, “meant no offense.” Being called a Malfoy was a big insult to him, and Ron didn’t like the comparison one bit. At least he saw how condescending he had been.

“So who’s got more points, Harry?” Even the twins had come over to look.

So Harry explained the scoring system; how each pawn was worth one point, how bishops and knights were worth three, rooks were worth five, and how queens and kings were worth the most. Without Ron's queen though, he didn't stand a chance. Ginny had eleven more points than him, and she was thrilled that she could now claim she'd beaten Ron in a game. Ron mumbled about crazy rules, but was too excited about soon opening more gifts to complain much.

"Everyone to the kitchen, then," Mrs. Weasley demanded. "We'll be leaving if that silly game's all settled with."

"Why not just leave from here?" Harry asked.

"This fireplace isn't hooked up to the floo network, Harry," Ron said. "You know that."

"We're not taking the floo." With a puzzled look from the others, Harry pulled out a small ring from his back pocket. It was the portkey he'd conjured and made earlier, and had shrunk to fit while he traveled. "Fred, give me a hand and enlarge this, will you?"

The Weasley parents looked like they wanted to argue, but Fred waved his wand over the ring and called out an *Engorgio* spell before they could protest. A large circular hoop appeared in its place; red in color.

"I thought we were traveling by floo?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "How on earth did you get approved for a portkey during the holidays, Harry? They're notoriously difficult to arrange with the Ministry."

"Don't worry about it Mrs. Weasley. I've been planning this trip for a long time now. I'm sure Dumbledore's informed you about our difference of opinions, and I'm just showing him that I can be responsible and concerned with my own safety for a change. Frankly, I'm surprised he's not here to try and stop me."

The twins cracked up at that, and Mrs. Weasley had a blush on her face. Harry turned to look at her, and after a small nudge from her husband, she went to explain.

"I'm sorry Harry, but he was here this morning. He heard about our planned trip, and dropped by to see if I'd allow him to place a tracking charm on something. He wanted to follow you home, but after Ron and Ginny explained to me some of what's happened between you, and after hearing that you were very well taken care of from Remus, I told him I wouldn't allow it. I actually had to yell at him to leave. I was so embarrassed."

"It was like Dumbledore got a howler in person, mate," the twins called out. "It was brilliant! I think Dumbledore was more upset with our Mum than he's ever been with either of us."

Mr. Weasley shook a finger at his sons, and said, "Hush you two; that's enough of that. Professor Dumbledore is under a lot of strain, as you very well know after yesterday. The last thing he needs is for you two to be making fun of him."

"Yesterday?" Harry asked. Directing his question back to the twins, he inquired, "Were you two on patrol yesterday as well? Where'd you end up? Did you capture any Death Eaters?"

"What patrol?," Ron demanded. "What did go on yesterday? Nobody will tell me!"

"It's Order business Ron, and it's not for you to know," Mrs. Weasley tried to placate her son.

"But Harry knows," he argued.

"Well, that's because Harry was involved. But I'll have no more talk about that nasty business now. We're late as it is, and I need to grab a few more things. Everyone else get around the portkey. We'll leave soon."

As Mrs. Weasley disappeared into the kitchen again, Harry promised Ron he'd fill him in when they had some time alone. Harry would at least tell Ron the same story he had told the St. Mungo's security guards, and about the letter he had written Dumbledore and the Minister. The rest though would be kept under wraps. Harry also made Ron promise to not bring the subject up again. Harry had no

idea how much Hermione's parents had been told about the danger of Voldemort and his goons, and Harry didn't want Ron to breach the subject unaware. If it were up to him, Harry would make sure the rest of the day was spent doing nothing but eating, drinking, unwrapping gifts, and having a good time. News of Voldemort and his attacks could wait until another day.

It wasn't long before Mrs. Weasley returned with parcels of wrapped cakes and pies. Apparently she hadn't managed to follow Harry's instructions to leave all the cooking to him, and Harry had to tell her point blank that there wasn't enough room with the portkey or on his dining room table for even more food. He assured her he'd made enough, and that her treats would keep under a freshness charm in the Burrow's kitchen. She worried about the food going to waste, but all it took was Harry pointing to Ron just once before those fears were put aside. Ron wouldn't let any dessert go to waste, and within the next two days, he'd be sure to finish them all off.

And so with a look around with his x-ray lens to make sure no one was catching a ride with the portkey that wasn't supposed to, Harry also made sure they all had a good hold on the hoop, and that the gifts and bags they had with them were in hand as well. Then with a spoken "activate" the portkey engaged, and all six Weasleys plus Harry felt a pull behind their navels, and were whisked away.

Less than a minute later they arrived in the kitchen of the Grangers' home, where Harry had sent a note with Hedwig that morning warning Hermione of their arrival. Ron and the twins all fell down in a tangled heap, but everyone else (Harry included!) managed to stay on their feet after the bumpy ride. Harry hadn't ever before created a portkey with enough power for so many people, and it was a learning experience just as much as anything else.

"Oh my," was the first thing Harry heard. Turning to look, he found out why. Dr. Granger, Hermione's mum, was off to the side, and had apparently witnessed the group's arrival. Not used to magic being performed anywhere around her, she must have been shocked and a little overwhelmed by their sudden appearance.

"Relax Mum; I told you they'd just pop up," Hermione chided her.  
"Happy Christmas everyone!"

While Ron and the twins picked themselves up off the ground, Harry, Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley made their way over to greet the Grangers. By then Hermione's dad had joined them in the kitchen, and was looking a bit nervously at Mr. Weasley, who was exploring the kitchen cabinets. Hermione must have informed her parents about his strange muggle hobby, and Harry just had to grin.

Mrs. Weasley must have noticed Dr. Granger's anxious looks as well, because she followed his line of vision to her husband, and tisked as she saw him riffling through their things.

"Arthur dear, come away from there and say hi to John and Emily."

He sheepishly looked ashamed at being caught, but joined them without pause.

"Don't worry Mr. Weasley," Harry told him. "I'll make sure you have enough to go check out at my home to keep you occupied." Mr. Weasley's face brightened considerably at that, and the group had a good laugh.

"Dr. Granger, Dr. Granger; nice to see you again," Harry greeted Hermione's parents warmly.

"You as well, Harry," the female Dr. Granger said. "We've heard so much about you over the years, it'll be nice to finally get to know you and Ron a little better. And thank you for the invitation to join you today; that was very kind. But please, call us Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Having two doctors in the family is always a bit confusing."

They seemed very pleasant, and introductions were made all around in short order. Mrs. Granger offered them all a drink, but Harry informed them all that he had drinks and appetizers waiting for everyone, and he'd like to get everyone moving. It was almost one already, and the afternoon was dwindling away.

So by taking another small ring out of his back pocket; this time yellow; Harry made his way over to the twins and said, "Fred, if you'll do the honors?" Harry could have enlarged the portkey himself, but the Weasleys didn't know he could do magic out of school, and he preferred to keep it that way.

"A hula hoop?" Mr. Granger asked. "What on earth do you have a hula hoop for?"

"It's the perfect shape and size for a portkey," Harry explained. Then he briefly had to explain what a portkey was, and that that was how they were getting to his home. Hermione looked impressed that Harry had been approved by the Ministry, and the Weasley parents looked ever more so as it was Harry's second portkey of the day.

"What's a hula hoop?" Ron asked though. It sufficiently distracted attention away from the portkey issue, and Harry once again had to explain.

"It's a muggle game, Ron. You spin these hoops around your waist, and see how long you can keep them going. Maybe Hermione will show you later?"

Ginny poked a harrumphing Hermione in the side as she starred incredulously at Harry; shocked that he had said such a thing. Both sets of parents though enjoyed matching blushes on their children, until the Grangers left to gather their things. They didn't have nearly as many bags as the Weasleys did, but the small addition would still make the portkey ride a full one.

After much rearranging and trading of packages, Harry finally managed to make sure everyone had a handgrip on the hoop. It was a good thing Harry had chosen such a wide object, or else not everybody would have fit. When they were all ready, Harry warned them all to keep hold and stay still. He also explained briefly to the Grangers what they were about to feel, so they knew what to expect. This time the activation word was "eclipse," but it worked just the same. Another pull behind their navels, and the group of ten were on their way.

The basement below his building was fast becoming a popular destination point for Harry's portkeys, and he enjoyed the look of confusion and disappointment on the others' faces as they got a look around. This time Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Mr. Granger, and Mr. Weasley had all fallen down. What was even funnier though, was when Hermione turned to him and asked, "Harry, please don't tell me you live in a muggle basement?"

The others thought him crazy when he burst out laughing; reminded of when Remus had asked the same question. That night had really gone well though, and Harry enjoyed Remus's reactions. Now he only hoped the others would be as amused.

"No Hermione, I don't live in a basement," he comforted her when he regained his composure. "Sorry about that, it's just you're not the first person to ask. Anyway, I live a few floors up. It's just because of the wards that we couldn't portkey straight in. I could, but that's because I've been there before. You'll understand in a second. Everyone have all their things?"

A few bags had fallen out of arms with the jolting arrival, but they got picked up quickly, as everyone was eager to leave the basement. Not that it was dirty or anything, it just wasn't a comfortable environment.

Harry had already pressed the button to call the lift down, and made another request of the twins to magically expand the space within when it arrived. They did so without complaint, and Harry and the Grangers were the first to enter. The Weasleys looked apprehensive to join them, but it was Ron who took the brave first step in. He'd heard of muggle lifts from Hermione when they were at the Ministry the year before, and knew it was supposed to be safe. The rest joined him (Fred and George were jumping up and down in it before their mum yelled at them to stop), and eventually the doors closed behind them.

"What floor, Harry?" Mr. Granger asked. He was standing next to the bank of buttons, and had his hand hovering above them.

"Thirteen, sir." His curiosity piqued, Harry wanted to know if such a short answer would dispel the Fidelius.

Mr. Granger right away went to push the button, only to pause a moment later when he couldn't find it. Then turning back to face Harry, he said, "No thirteen, Harry. Do you mean the fourteenth floor?"

"No, Mr. Granger, you must have missed the button. I, Harry Potter, live on the thirteenth floor."

Mr. Granger gave him a weird look, but turned again to take a quick peak, and did a double take when he swore he saw a button appear out of nowhere. Just thinking it was another quirk of magic, he didn't give it another thought, and pushed the button. Hermione however had been watching her father, and caught the button's appearance. For a second she looked up at Harry in confusion, and then when he smiled at her, it dawned!

"Harry," she whispered, "you couldn't of..."

"Again Hermione," Harry had fun replying, "you're just repeating Remus."

The others were all looking at him confused about what was going on, and Harry took a deep breath to explain what had happened.

"As Hermione just figured out, my home is protected under a Fidelius Charm; just like Order headquarters. I'm my own secret keeper, and when I said 'Harry Potter lives on the thirteenth floor,' I told you the location. It doesn't matter you don't know where this building is, as long as you're in it. That's why we couldn't portkey or floo in, but had to come to the basement instead. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I'm sure Hermione will explain the charm to you in more detail later. For now, just know that it's very advanced and secure, and there are very few security precaution I could have taken that would be safer."

Turning to the Weasleys now, Harry said, "And I hope now you're satisfied that I've taken measures to be careful. That's why you and the Order couldn't find me this summer; because I didn't want to be found. Remus has known of course, and now you do too. And even though I know you can't tell Dumbledore where I am because you're not my secret keeper, please don't tell him anything. He hasn't

earned my trust yet, and I'll tell him what I want him to know when I feel the time is right."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were busy arguing quietly among themselves, but otherwise the rest of the short trip was made in silence. Harry didn't mind, as he knew the second the doors opened up to his Hideaway, the questions and comments would come flooding in.

And boy, was he right.

"Holly shit!" Either Fred or George said.

'George! Watch your language!"

"Sorry, Mum. But really, take a look around."

Harry laughed. "Thanks George, I think. Again, it's been said before though. Neville had the same response."

"A very nice place you seem to have here, Harry," Mrs. Granger said. Then turning to look at Hermione, who bashfully looked away, she continued, "We were led to believe that you weren't being taken well care of."

"Oh," Harry realized, "that was where I used to live. Sorry about the confusion. I just moved in here this past July. I used to live with my relatives, and they were horrible. You probably heard about them from Hermione."

Harry didn't have time to get a response though, because Mrs. Weasley had pushed her way forward and grabbed Harry by the shoulders.

"Harry, is this for real? All this time we were worried about you living on the streets or in a rat infested flat, and you've been here in this...this...this palace?"

"It's hardly a palace, Mrs. Weasley," Harry calmly said. "When I found it, it was just four bare walls. It just took a lot of time to set up and

decorate, is all. After living with the Dursleys for so long, I wanted a place I could call my own, and take pride in. I told you all not to worry about me, and that I'd be fine. Why else do you think I require not one, but two house-elves to work for me? They've got their work cut out for them with this place to maintain."

Mrs. Weasley looked like she wanted to argue more, but her husband stopped her. "Molly dear, there's no point arguing any further. We've known now for quite some time that Harry has been following his own council, and at least now we know he's been safe and comfortably cared for. Our sons however, have disappeared, and will dismantle this house and plant exploding goodies unless we find them."

Mrs. Weasley didn't deflate at all at her husband's warning, but did turn her attention away from Harry. At the mention of her sons' meddling, she didn't even have to ask which ones they were. "Fred! George! Get back in here at once," she yelled out.

A second later the twins emerged from the east wing hallway, with Neville guiding them with a hand on each of their shoulders. "No need to shout Mum, we weren't up to anything wrong."

"Ha," Neville laughed. "That is, only if you count trying to sneak a drink of whiskey as nothing wrong. I caught them in the muggle room, Harry, raiding your bar. It feels good to catch them for once. I owe them for all the times I got turned into a canary I expect."

"Thanks Neville. Let me have those two for a sec. Why don't you introduce around?" Remus had come out from his room as well at the noise, and was engaging Hermione's parents with light conversation. They looked thrilled to meet one of Hermione's former professors, and Harry knew he could spare a few minutes to try and talk some sense into the twins.

"Listen you two," he said quietly when they were far enough away from the others. "I don't mind a joke or two, but promise me, no pranks or trouble tonight. I was even thinking about taking away your wands, but Remus convinced me you wouldn't go for that."

"Not for a million galleons, Harry. Trying to take away a man's wand is like trying to cut off his, well, his other wand."

"I know," Harry replied, "which is why I didn't ask you. But this is the Grangers first time around magic in years, and I don't want to spook them. I also don't want my house to collapse around me, so I'm warning you now. No pranks, gags, new inventions, or else I'm not giving you all your Christmas gifts."

"Harry," George put his hand to his chest in an overly dramatized gesture, "you wound us to think so little of our intentions.

"But you're absolutely right," Fred added on. "But blackmailing us with our Christmas gifts to behave nicely?"

"Pure genius!" The both chimed in. "You have our word we're on our best behavior. Ron's more fun to prank than you anyway."

"Good," Harry was relieved. "Then I promise to help you prank him as reward. You'll know what I mean in a few hours."

After that, they three returned to the rest and mingled. Mrs. Weasley was shocked at her sons' good behavior, and Harry wondered if she'd be pleased to know he'd resorted to blackmail and bribery to get them to do so or not. Didn't matter one way or the other as far as Harry was concerned though, because he just wanted everyone to have a nice time.

"Harry," Ron called out from across the room, "you said something about drinks and appetizers?"

And so Harry showed them to the muggle room where everyone helped themselves. Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville all had butterbeer, and so did Ron after his mum caught him trying to sneak in something stronger. Fred and George were allowed liquor, though they weren't familiar with the muggle varieties Harry had gotten. Whiskey was close enough to what they knew by name though, and poured each other two fingers of Harry's finest. It didn't smoke their ears like they were used to, but it still made them cough, and after that they settled for drinking water.

The adults all had something different as well, and Remus had to assure the Grangers that Harry had just stocked the bar for that night, and didn't normally drink. Mrs. Granger didn't mind him having the occasional small sip though. She informed them that she'd been letting Hermione have small tastes of wine for two years now, when they were home alone and having a nice meal. Harry didn't have any wine, but the selection of brandies and coolers he'd gotten were good enough. Mr. Granger had thought butterbeer was more like its muggle counterpart, but was still pleased with the sweet drink.

The appetizers Harry had mentioned were set up back in the kitchen area, along the bar that separated it from the rest of the room. There was a nice spread of smoked salmon, oriental dumplings, vegetables dips, and some normal finger food like chicken strips and cocktail shrimp as well. It all looked very fancy, and Mrs. Granger was paying so much attention to the food that she nearly dropped her plate and screamed when she spotted "a deranged little person" behind the counter.

"No Mum," Hermione laughed, "that's just Dobby. He is a bit deranged, but he's a house-elf, not a little person. I told you about them, remember?"

"Oh yes," her dad said, "you're spew thingy."

"It's S.P.E.W. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Ron was snickering in his plate of food, and when Harry met his eyes, he couldn't help laughing either. Both of them had heard about S.P.E.W. endless times over the years, and it was very funny that her dad was making the same cracks that they had.

"Oh, stop it you two!"

Eventually they did, and the Grangers got to meet Dobby and Winky who had taken a short break to welcome everyone to "Mr. Harry Potter's most wonderfulness Hideaway!"

It took another few minutes to explain their quirky nature and strange way of talking, but after watching them in action for some minutes, Mrs. Granger especially was quite fascinated.

The kitchen had been cleaned much since Harry saw it last, as most of the food was in the ovens or already waiting in the icebox or warming cupboard. Still, the kitchen was right in the middle of the action, so Harry suggested the group retire to the muggle room to enjoy their food. All the Weasleys' and Grangers' gifts had already been placed under the tree, and Harry didn't want to tempt Ron or the others by sitting everyone so close.

"So Harry, how did you find this place?" Someone asked. Harry didn't mind repeating the story of how he'd been strolling the streets of London one day, and had eaten lunch at a Fish & Chips stand that had pointed him in the right direction.

And soon after that, he explained about how he'd thought up the idea of hiding an entire floor in the first place. Remus pointed out that Harry had been making anonymous donations to the building's owner to pay his share, and after hearing that, the Grangers' faces (Hermione's most of all) relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the story.

Each got up for a few refills of drinks, some more food, and before he knew it, Harry looked at his watch, and it was already past two.

"How about a tour?" He asked the group. Only Ron and Fred were still picking at their plates, but even they had had enough to put them down. Their mum had been constantly reminding them that a full meal wasn't too far ahead, and that they shouldn't fill themselves. Knowing Ron, Harry wasn't worried.

The tour started in the east wing since they were already in the muggle room, and Harry explained all the objects to the Weasleys. Mr. Granger surprised them all by claiming to be very good at pool, and he promised to play a few games after dinner. Apparently he had played in pool halls while in uni, and had even hustled some when he needed money. "That was a lifetime ago, though." Hermione looked the most surprised of them all.

Once he tore Mr. Weasley away from the telly (Hermione had accidentally turned it on; silly girl), he escorted the group through the doors to his suite next. Ginny was ecstatic to see it was an almost identical copy of his trunk's quarters, and Harry allowed her to give them a min-tour of the bedroom, closet, and en suite bath. Of course this brought up a whole new line of questions about how Ginny was so familiar with Harry's bedroom chambers, but a quick explanation of his trunk answered those without further embarrassment.

Harry skipped the Longbottom's flat completely, saying the space was just empty, and nothing was in there. Remus and Neville shared a look between them, but didn't mention a word. It was still undecided how they'd handle every detail involving Neville's parents, but those decisions could wait for another day.

Ron tried to push the door open anyway for a look, but it was locked thanks to Remus, and without a wand, Ron couldn't get in.

The storage room was cramped and disorderly, and perhaps Mr. Weasley's favorite room so far. It reminded him of his tool shed he said, and he was still smiling when his wife forced him to shut the door.

Neville explained the dueling platform and exercise room to give Harry a break, and demonstrated some of the equipment for those who didn't know what they did. Mr. Weasley recognized the practice dummies from a long ago popular company, and promised to tell Harry more later. Mr. Granger recognized the name brand of the exercise equipment, and whistled at the price. "You've been ripped off," he told Harry. "There's equipment just as good on the market, but half the cost." For the first time Harry then noticed that Hermione's father was in good shape for a man his age. He must have worked out, and knew what he was talking about. They also agreed to talk more after dinner.

Then they had to cross the library to get to the west wing, and Hermione and her mother's eyes lit up like Christmas trees. Harry could have sworn he heard Mr. Granger curse, "Good Lord, not again," under his breath, but wasn't sure. Either way they had to be torn away after five minutes, as the others had finished looking at

Harry's collection. Again, Harry had hid the darker material before his guests' arrival.

The guest bedrooms were all shown quickly, except for the back two, which Harry claimed Neville and Remus were staying in. Remus was actually staying in one, and there was no reason to give away the fact that Neville had moved to another room.

The three empty rooms were also likewise briefly visited, and this time Harry didn't have to skip over any, as he'd gotten rid of the last remaining evidence of Wormtail's old cell.

The laundry was nothing special (except its size), and Hermione was excited to hear that Dobby had cleaned his and Winky's room, to show it off as well. Even Harry was interested to see inside it, as he hadn't the courage to ask before. Pleased though, he noted that they had kept the sock decor, as well as the single bed. Winky had added some frilly lace curtains and throw rugs, but overall it remained the same as when he'd decorated it.

Even Remus and Neville were taking a close look (they hadn't seen the room either), and had a good laugh over the sock theme.

"Laugh all you want," Harry told them. "It's not so funny when it's you racking your brains, trying to come up with one more original sock to paint on the wall. I spent an hour a day, for an entire week furnishing this room!" That comment led to a short history of how Harry had been introduced to Dobby and Winky, their history together, Dobby's fascination with socks, and how they'd become Harry's friends and employees.

And if Harry had anything to worry about how Hermione would view his treatment of the two small elves, just seeing their room and the pride they took at calling Harry their friend was enough to dissipate her fears, and therefore his. She was very proud of Harry, and must have learned something from that book he had leant her on her birthday. She even gave Harry a kiss on the cheek a little misty-eyed, and then ran behind Ginny with a blush when her parents had hooted and cat called after witnessing the display of affection.

Ron wasn't hooting at Hermione though. He was standing with his brothers, sulking.

The last part of the tour was just showing off his great room in detail, and with closer looks at the massive fireplace and living room area, the tour was completed. It was approaching three, and with only about an hour before dinner, Harry knew they better move on to the gifts. Noticing Ron's sour mood, he thought he'd try to cheer up his best friend some.

"Hey Ron, think it's time to open presents yet, mate?"

That immediately brought a smile to Ron's face, and he nodded enthusiastically. After that he nearly ran over to the tree, and the others followed behind. There were barely enough seats for all twelve of them, but they managed with some sharing. Mrs. Granger was sitting on her husband's lap in an armchair, and Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Harry were all squeezed together on the same couch. Somehow Harry had landed between Hermione and Ginny, and he wasn't complaining one bit!

"Who's goes first?" Ginny asked.

Harry just shrugged his shoulders. "I've never done this before Gin, so I have no idea. How do you normally do this?"

"Well, we always have the youngest person open a present first," Mr. Granger said, "and then next oldest, and so on and so on. Once everybody's had a turn, then it's sort of a free for all."

"We usually just skip to the free for all part," Mr. Weasley joked back. "With six boys in the house, plus our rambunctious girl, it's hard enough just to get them to eat breakfast in the mornings, let alone open gifts in order. I think we can manage for the day though, right Fred? George? Ron?"

Fred and George were still on their best behavior, and Ron reluctantly agreed as well. He'd already been shaking a gift with his name on it, but placed it back under the tree at a glance from his mum.

"Sounds good," Harry agreed. "But let's do the Dobby and Winky's gifts first. They need to keep an eye on the oven, and I don't want to bother them right before dinner.

So Harry called his small friends over, and they bashfully accepted their few gifts.

Dobby got socks, of course, from Harry, Neville, and Remus. Harry's were the best naturally, both because they came from "the bestest wizard in the world," and because they were stripped every color of the rainbow, and had individual toes sewn on each foot. It was a novelty gag really, but Harry knew Dobby would love them the second he unwrapped them.

Ron had given Dobby two of his old Weasley jumpers that had shrunk in the wash, and Hermione had knitted him a scarf and mittens to match the hats she'd made the year before. The others hadn't thought to buy Dobby anything, but he was very pleased with what he got. It took a round of knee hugging and tearful thank you before he left again for the kitchen, wearing every single new article of clothing he'd received.

Winky had gotten even fewer gifts, as Ron didn't get her anything, but still so new to being treated equally, she didn't even seem to notice. Hermione had made her some lace aprons for around the kitchen, and Remus had gotten her some muggle cookbooks with recipes from her favorite television chefs.

Harry had bought Winky some nice new cooking pans and cleaning supplies (she liked them very much), but Neville's gift had been the best by far. Days ago she'd made an off-hand comment that she liked how "Mr. Harry Potter sir" had always smelled so nice (Harry had been wearing cologne), and Neville had picked up on it. For in his gift to her, Winky received nice perfume, potpourri, bath beads, fragrant soaps, and skin lotions. Neville said he wasn't sure if she'd like those things or not, and he could always exchange them for something else, but he didn't get an answer except Winky hugging his legs, too happy for words.

She too took some convincing to let go and return to the kitchen, but when she did, Ron threw a gift with Ginny's name at his sister, eager to get on with the presents.

"Who's this from," she asked while inspecting the box. It was from her parents, and Ginny was pleased to find a new Weasley jumper and some nice skirts. Unlike other years though the jumper was knitted of fine cashmere, and the skirts were not used, but brand new!

Harry was glad for his friend. It looked like the Weasleys had dipped into some of the money he'd given them, and treated their kids this year. Ron and the twins were bound to be happy as well.

Hermione was next in line, and opened a gift from Ron, to find some books, candy, and a small charm bracelet. The books and candy were impersonal, but at least he had scored some points with the jewelry. And while not nearly as nice as the sapphire pendant he still didn't know about, it was far better than the horrible bottle of perfume he'd gotten Hermione the year before. She had managed to "accidentally" drop that some time ago.

Ron opened his gifts from Harry next, and found a few things. A large collection of chocolate frogs and Bertie Botts, some dungbombs and wet start fireworks, and a small plain looking black case. Ron was thrilled with the candy and fireworks (Fred and George had complained about the dungbombs), but didn't know what to make of the black case. Only when he opened it up to find a Gringott's key and a short note, did he turn to look at Harry.

"I opened a Gringott's account for you," Harry explained. He could tell that Ron was about to get all huffy though, and interrupted before he could start. "This isn't charity or anything like that though, so don't think it is. Sirius left me all his money in his will, and the only condition was that I had to promise to spread the wealth around. So I got you, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, and Luna all your own Gringott's accounts. There're five hundred galleons in there to start, and you can save it or spend it however you like. The note is just for you though, so don't share that with anyone if you don't want."

Ron unfolded the note, and whopped for joy when he wrote what Harry had written. Ginny and the others begged to know what was on the small scrap of paper, and Ron didn't mind in the least to hand it over to his family.

Ginny read the note out loud.

Dear Ron,

I've deposited an additional five hundred galleons in your account, to save for a new broomstick. Whiggman will come out with his complete series this summer, and I don't know the cost for certain, but I do know that you'll be great on his keeper broom. If there's any money left over afterwards, enjoy it! The first five hundred galleons is more a gift from Sirius than me, and I figured I should get you more than candy and stink bombs for Christmas. Happy Holidays, mate!

Harry

Any anger Ron had been feeling was completely gone, and he actually got up and made his way to Harry, and did a Hagrid impersonation by thumping him on his back in thanks. Harry made mock cries, and said, "It's my turn now, so hand me a gift before I die over here."

Harry unwrapped his jumper and homemade fudge from the Weasleys next, and was very happy. Ginny had already put on her jumper (as she was the only other person to open one yet), so Harry decided to join her. When he pulled off his old one though, and put on the soft wool sweater, a familiar tug behind his navel alerted him that something was wrong.

When Harry had pulled the jumper up over his head, he'd still been sitting next to Ginny on the couch. When he pulled his head through the jumper's neck though, Harry found himself in a whole different place. He was now in the very familiar kitchen of number twelve Grimmauld Place, and he had an audience as well. Professor

McGonagall, Snape, Hagrid, Mad-Eye, Tonks, and the manipulative bastard himself were all in attendance.

"Ah Harry, I see you opened your gift later than we expected," Dumbledore twinkled at him. Acting as if nothing was wrong further infuriated the young man.

"What did you do? How did I get here?" Harry demanded to know.

"Can't you begin to guess, Potter?" Snape sneered.

"Now Severus; that was uncalled for. Do you really want a repeat of what happened in my office earlier this year?"

Tonks snickered some at the reference, and Harry almost cracked a smile before he remembered he wasn't there to play games. He was there against his will.

"You turned my jumper into a portkey, didn't you?" Harry directed at Dumbledore. The Order might have been present, but this was clearly his plan.

"Yes Harry; set to activate once you put it on. If you'll remember, your first Christmas at Hogwarts I came upon you visiting a certain mirror. Even then you had been wearing Molly's find knit work, so I knew you'd put it on once you opened it. I'm sorry I had to resort to such drastic measures Harry, but I can't allow you to continue putting yourself at risk because we simply disagree. I only hope you will forgive me in the future."

"You've just made another huge mistake," Harry hissed. Turning to look at the others, he nodded briefly at Hagrid and McGonagall, pleased to see that they didn't look comfortable with the actions Dumbledore had taken. Tonks didn't know what to think, and if Harry had to guess, Mad-Eye was just enjoying the show.

In a merry and controlled voice, Harry greeted them by saying, "Happy Christmas to you all, and I'll see you back at school." Then Harry turned to face Dumbledore, and sneered. "I'll see you tomorrow at noon, and you had better have this place cleared out. If there was

even the slightest chance to keep me from selling Grimmauld Place now, you just ruined it." Then without another word, Harry apparated away, leaving a room full of shocked adults.

"Albus, what just happened?" McGonagall asked.

It was Moody who had answered though. "That Minerva, was just Albus pissing off one already very pissed off young man. You really screwed the pooch this time, Albus." Then he cackled his own personal laughter, and left the room. Damn, he was starting to like that Potter kid!

Harry arrived back at his Hideaway less than a minute after he left, and his appearance at first went unnoticed among all the screaming and confusion by the others. Harry actually had to raise sparks to get their attention, and then of course they all asked the same thing.

"What the bloody hell just happened to you?"

Harry retook his seat between Ginny and Hermione as he told mostly Remus and the Weasleys that Dumbledore had turned his jumper into a portkey, and had forced him to headquarters against his will. Remus shook his head in disappointment of his leader, and the Weasleys had mostly been shocked that Dumbledore had used them (or their gift, more literally) without their knowledge. Mrs. Weasley promised Harry that she'd have words with him the first opportunity she got, and at least Harry wasn't worried about her spilling any of his secrets soon. Dumbledore had just guaranteed that.

It was Mrs. Granger who asked the intelligent question of how he had returned, and Harry just explained that he had an emergency portkey on him at all times in case something similar happened. He didn't admit to apparating, and nobody knew the difference. And luckily, nobody thought to ask how he'd been approved for yet another portkey, clearly with a special intention in mind.

Neville opened his gift next (he and Harry had discovered he was a few hours older), and was pleased to see that Remus had gotten him a wand holster like Harry's. With all the practice they'd been doing the last few weeks, Neville couldn't wait to try it out. His was made of

leather instead of dragon hide, but the quick-draw auror release still worked the same way.

Fred and George opened gifts from their parents, then the parents opened gifts from their kids, and then just like Mr. Weasley had promised, the gift opening became a free for all!

Harry got some books and journals from Hermione and her parents, as well as a fashionable pair of muggle sunglasses. Now that he didn't wear regular lens, he realized that for the first time he could wear the tinted shades.

Ginny had gotten him some new Quidditch pads and gear, and an unmarked bottle that had a small note that said he should bring it with him to their next "captain meeting." Reading though the code, Harry knew it had something to do with their massages, and he couldn't wait to find out what.

Neville had gotten him a large foe-glass for his home, and above the fireplace it looked great! Yes, there were some distinct figures in the background, but Harry knew he'd never be perfectly safe until Voldemort was dead.

And Ron had gotten Harry a bunch more sweets, and a small bronze cauldron as well. It was one of the few cauldron types he didn't already have, and was useful because although rarely used, it was required for certain seventh year potions. Harry had mentioned to Hermione that he planned to pick one up next summer, and knew she must have informed his other friend. Ron's only comment?

"I can't believe I got you Potions equipment for Christmas!"

Harry didn't see what everyone else was getting, but he made sure to see everyone's reaction to his gifts. Besides the Gringotts' vaults he'd already explained, he put a lot of thought into what everyone would want.

Mr. Wealsey just got a card, but also a note saying that one each of every muggle appliance in his home had already been delivered to his tool shed. The appliances from the extra flats that no longer

existed served Harry no purpose, and he'd had Hedwig deliver them while his guests had first arrived, and had gotten a drink n the muggle room. In fact, Hedwig was hardly noticed until Harry was reminded of her delivery. But there she was, in her customary spot on her perch in the corner. With all the excitement, Harry knew he shouldn't feel bad about ignoring her, but still did. He called her over to his shoulder to make it up to her, and she seemed to forgive him.

Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger both got spa appointments from Harry in muggle London, as he though it was a nice way they could relax and get to know each other. Mrs. Weasley was often wound too tight, and by going with Hermione's mum, she'd have a muggle guide in the world she wasn't comfortable in herself. Both ladies loved the gift, and thanked Harry for his insight.

Mr. Granger didn't know what to expect from Harry (truly he hadn't even been expecting anything), but was surprised when Fred dropped a large wrapped parcel on his lap. It was a gift from him, George, and Harry, he said, and should come in handy. Mr. Granger was a little apprehensive about opening the gift (Hermione must have told him to avoid anything the twins gave him), but did, and look confused at the large package of sweets he was holding.

"They're Numbing Candies," Harry explained. "I had the idea, and gave George and Fred some money to invent them. Real simple actually; a fourth year could make a numbing potion. But these are different because they're sweet, and they last longer. I figured you could give them to kids who are scared of shots, or adults who are allergic to Novocain. The ingredients are all natural, and are guaranteed to keep a mouth numb for exactly one hour. I never got to go to the dentist, but my cousin Dudley used to complain about needles all the time. I figured it would be a good idea."

"You mean you made candy into a numbing agent that will last for an hour?" Mrs. Granger asked. Harry nodded, and she gave her husband a huge hug. "Oh Jim, this will be perfect for the new kid's room! I bet we'll have every dentist in London after our supplier. Thank you Harry! Thank you Fred and George! I don't think you know how difficult it is to treat young children sometimes. Why, even Hermione used to cry when she used to get her check ups."

It was obvious they liked the gift, and Fred and George even had to admit that what they thought had been a crazy idea by Harry turned out to be a good one.

There were a few minutes when nobody else picked up one of Harry's gifts, but then Remus got his, and smiled at the note from Harry. Harry had gotten him a Gringotts vault as well (with substantially more money in it than five hundred galleons), a new briefcase with engraved initials, and a promise to go shopping for a complete new wardrobe in the upcoming week.

Harry had given Neville the latest muggle hand-held gaming system, and almost ten games. He'd done so well in the arcades, that Harry knew it was just the thing to give him. After all, how many books about plants could one boy really need? Harry knew that Neville wouldn't be able to use the battery operated system at Hogwarts, but he'd still be able to use it on the train ride there, and at home. At the least, Harry figured his friend could play the games as he visited with his parents, and sat at their bedside.

Hermione was a difficult person to shop for as always, and Harry had ended up just getting her her own set of dictating quills and some fancy monogrammed parchment and envelopes. She was pleased though at the practical and yet personal gifts, and had another hug for Harry in thanks.

And again, Ron shot a nasty look towards Harry. Except when he had opened his own gifts, Ron was starting to act strange, and Harry didn't like it.

After all of his successes, the twins had actually resorted to digging through the pile of remaining gifts to find Harry's to them. However, they were disappointed when they found none, and instead just got to watch Harry grin at them

"Looking for something?" He taunted.

"Yeah, where's our present," George answered with gusto.

"George! Harry's been nice enough to fund that foolish shop of yours, and have us over for the day for what smells like a wonderful meal. Show some appreciation!"

"It's alright Mrs. Weasley," Harry calmed her. "I'm just having some fun with them." Then taking a small key out of his side pocket, Harry flipped it through the air to Fred's awaiting hands.

"Another key to a Gringott's safe?" He guessed.

"Nope," Harry smiled, "and you'll never guess, so just let me tell you. It's a key to a small shop in Diagon Alley, and it's all yours now."

Mouths dropped all around the room, and none fell lower than Fred and George's. For perhaps the first time in their lives, the Weasley twins were speechless.

Taking their silence as an invitation to continue, Harry went on. "It's a small shop next to Florean's Ice Cream Shop, and behind the cauldron store. I found out I own the property when searching through my parents' paperwork, and it's been empty for almost a year now. I haven't been in it, but I've seen floor plans, and it looks big enough for a new WWW store. There's a modest three bedroom flat on the second floor, the shop's magically expanded to triple its size, and there's a small cellar I figured you guys could use for development and storage. Really it's your to do with what you want, and I thought you could have it rent free until you start turning a profit. When that happens, we'll sit down, and arrange a fair lease."

Again, more silence, although the Grangers didn't know what the big deal was, and were more intrigued by the Weasley parents' gaping mouths.

"Harry," Fred finally came to, "that's about the best gift we could have gotten, mate. We've been saving up to open another shop, but with the increased rents because of increased security, we thought we would have to wait another year."

"Cheers, mate," George added on. "I reckon' whether you like it or not, you just became a lifelong partner. We'll do you proud Harry"

Ron was the only one who didn't look pleased though. In fact, he was being downright rude.

"It's a bit much, isn't it," he said. "I mean, it's not as if you owe them anything Harry. Do you have to constantly flaunt your wealth around like that?"

Ron's comments brought the entire group to defend Harry, and eventually Ron apologizes for speaking out of turn. Still, he sat as far away from Harry as possible, which more than just one person noticed.

Mrs. Weasley wasn't much easier to bring around to the twins' way of thinking, but eventually even she got caught up in the holiday cheer, and gave in to the pressure. No longer her babies, she just didn't want to accept her sons were not only starting their own business, but now by the looks of things, moving out as well. The little comfort she could take however, was that neither Fred nor George had an ounce of talent in the kitchen, and would have to eat their meals at the Borrow. "We might not be sleeping there anymore," they said, "but it will always be our home."

A few more gifts were exchanged, and soon the dwindling pile had only a few left. Harry was looking for the large one from Remus he'd seen earlier that day, but couldn't find it anywhere. He was just about to ask about it, when Ginny interrupted him with an outstretched hand. In it was a single piece of parchment, which had been his gift to her. This was it, the moment he had been waiting for.

"Harry," she batted her eyes, "this says that I have to come and ask you personally for my gift."

"What gift?" Harry played along. "Did I get you something?"

Ginny already had her new Gringott's key in her pocket, but swung a fist into Harry's arm prodding him to drop the act.

"Ouch, that hurt! Remind me never to get on your bad side, Gin. Okay, I'll get your gift." Then Harry turned to face Hedwig, who was perched on the back of the couch behind him.

"Hedwig girl, would you mind getting Ginny's gift now? You know the one."

Ginny and the others looked at Harry strangely, but Hedwig (not to mention Neville and Remus) must have known what he was talking about. For not a second later she disappeared in a burst of white and gold flames, and Harry rose to walk to the window.

"Fred," Harry asked, "You're my magic guy today. Would you please vanish this pane of glass? I'm expecting a delivery soon."

Fred hadn't been asking Harry to explain his requests all day. And after such a great gift, he wasn't about to then. So he vanished the glass without question, and just shrugged his shoulders when Ron asked him if he knew what was up.

They didn't have to wait long though. For just a short time later, Hedwig came flying in the room from around the building's corner, with a friend in tow.

"I know it's not as surprising an entrance as Rowen made on Hermione's birthday, but Happy Christmas Ginny!"

Hedwig's new friend had perched on Harry's outstretched arm, and as he walked slowly over to where Ginny was frozen in shock, he presented her with her new familiar.

"Ginny, everyone else had an owl, so I thought it time you got one as well. But I couldn't think of what type to get you, and then I remembered when Sirius used those colorful birds from where he'd been hiding. You liked them, I remembered, but unfortunately those were toucans, and aren't good for general use. They're too small, and don't do well in colder climates. It's actually amazing that Sirius got that message delivered at all. So I did some reading, and I found that South American parrots don't have those problems, and a few magical breeds exist. I had to send Hedwig to Brazil to find a seller

with enough birds in stock, and Raul here's been living with us for about a week now."

As Ginny took in the spectacularly colored red, green, and blue bird, she started to move towards it; to ruffle his feathers. Raul didn't seem to mind, as he'd been kind of ignored the past week, and had spent three weeks before that just making his way to England.

"Is he really for me, Harry?" Ginny gently asked. She was thinking it was too good to be true.

Ron snorted, obviously either upset or jealous again at something or other, but Harr just ignored him. He was having such a wonderful holiday so far, he could wait to deal with Ron once back at school.

"Yup, all for you. Hermione's got two pets, I've got Hedwig; hell, even Pigwidgeon's got personality enough for an owl ten times his size. But with his inability to carry heavy packages, and Errol getting on in years, I thought you might like to have a new pet. Raul's already a year old, so that's why you can't rename him. He's very smart, so he's used to being called it by now. He can talk too! He's supposed to be able to learn about twenty phrases in his first year with you, and he knows some already from the pet shop owner that sold him. That man must have had a weird sense of humor though, because some of what Raul says is strange."

"Is that true, little guy?" Ginny cooed. Raul was responding more to her touch, and nibbling on her finger now. Harry lifted his arm quickly to get a rise out of the bird, and he lifted his wings to steady himself. Then turning his head to Harry, Raul squawked for the first time.

"Que es Bandeho?"

"See what I mean," Harry laughed, "strange sense of humor."

"What did he say?" George asked.

"It better off that you don't know," Mrs. Granger laughed back. "It was Spanish, and not too polite."

"He's our kind of bird then," Fred was pleased to answer. "He's even colored Weasley red! He's one of us already."

Harry let Raul walk over to Ginny's arm, and if to cement their relationship, Raul spoke up again. This time it was in English, and everybody had a good laugh at Ginny's expense.

"Pretty lady! Pretty lady! Swawk!"

"Like I said," Harry grinned, "the pet store owner taught him some phrases already."

Raul got passed around the room some more, and even Harry was surprised with how comfortable and at ease he was in a room full of strangers. Harry had paid extra for a well trained bird, and apparently he'd gotten his money's worth.

As the last of the gifts were opened up, Harry had to instruct Ginny quickly on how to care for her new parrot. He ate mostly seeds and nuts, required a constant heating charm on his perch to counter the cold British winters, and had to be misted with water at least once a day so his feathers would stay healthy. Unlike owls, parrots were used to more humid weather, and needed the extra moisture in the air. But by simply taking a water bottle and spraying it in a fine mist over Raul, he'd be fine for a whole day.

It wasn't until four twenty that the group got to sit down to dinner. Harry's dining room table had been expanded to seat fourteen, as even Dobby and Winky were joining them to eat. Hermione insisted that she help them serve the platters though, but after being thrilled they had been left relatively alone to cook the meal, the elves didn't mind her slight intrusion to help serve it in the least.

Roast goose, a baked ham, Beef Wellington; all the holiday favorites were prepared. There were also not less than a dozen side dishes and three types of salads, and Winky took great praise from Ron when even he wasn't able to sample every dish. And while they ate, the group passed light conversation about what the children had been learning at Hogwarts. The roles they all had played in their first meeting on the train (A boy named Neville has lost his toad!), the

house points they all had won to secure the house cup their first year, and that horrific first flying lesson when one boy had ended up in the hospital wing, and the other had been promoted to stardom as his house's new seeker.

Again, with so much attention being placed on him and Neville, Harry noticed Ron's mood swing again. Honestly, he was being worse than a hormonal pregnant woman!

Mr. and Mrs. Granger talked a little about how they viewed the wizarding world from a muggle parents' perspective, and they indulged Mr. Weasley in describing, in detail, as much about electricity and airplanes as they could.

After the meal, Fred and George decided to tackle the muggle room, and Ron and Neville joined them. Hermione and Ginny retired to the library to spend some quite time digesting their meal, while Hermione read books and Ginny talked to Raul. The adults returned to the living room for aperitifs, and glad to be away from their kids if only for a little while, appreciated the company of each other.

Harry was content to just drift from group to group, spending a few minutes with each, and listening with interest. He ended up spending most of his time in the muggle room with the guys, and managed to beat Ron in a game finally; which Ron wasn't pleased about. Fred and George both beat him at pool though, which surprised everyone but the twins. In hushed tones, they let the others know that they'd been sneaking into muggle bars in London for two years, and it wasn't the first time either of them had seen a pool table. Thinking about it again; no, Harry wasn't surprised.

When they all had a chance to relax, Dobby informed them that dinner had been cleared away, and that dessert was ready. Most of the adults groaned at thoughts of more food, and for once Molly Weasley was glad she had left her cooking behind.

Three chocolate cakes, apple pie, strawberry tortes, homemade macadamia nut ice cream, a pumpkin/pecan pie monstrosity, and Harry's crème brûlée all adorned the table. Ron's eyes were watering as he retook his seat, and except for one crack about the "burnt

puddings," everyone only had wonderful things to say about the selections.

Harry's dessert had been a little lighter than he would have liked, but without the suggested blow torch, he didn't care; it still tasted great! Everyone else liked them as well, and no dessert was left untouched.

It was another hour later, after tea, more resting, and a nap by Mr. Weasley on a sofa, that everyone got up to leave. Harry had a portkey ready for the Grangers, and now that the Weasleys were informed by Harry about his Hideaway's location, they would be traveling by floo. Raul had already flown ahead, and the group had just said their goodbyes.

"I really love Raul Harry," was the only thank you that Harry remembered though. "He's perfect, and I'll always remember tonight. You've been so good to my family. Thank you." Then Ginny reached over and kissed Harry on the cheek. She didn't miss this time, but she did linger. It was also more intimate and forward than even the hickies Harry had given her moths ago.

"Don't forget my present to you," she whispered right before leaving. "I want the chance to pay you back."

Harry stood pondering her words long after everybody had gone. Neville had disappeared into his parents' flat, and only Remus was left with him.

"Come on Loverboy, you've got one more present to open tonight."

Loverboy? Harry was about to ask what that was about, when he remembered the gift he'd been looking for, but never found. "Yeah," he complained. "You've been holding out on me, haven't you?"

"I thought it best, Harry," Remus explained. "I didn't know what your reaction would be, so I wanted to give this to you in private. Follow me to my room."

Harry did, and with a little apprehension, took the large gift from Remus's hands.

"Remember on your birthday when I wrote you that Sirius and I were working on something for you together, but things had changed, and it wasn't ready yet?"

"Yes." In truth, not a week had gone by when Harry hadn't wondered when he'd get to find out what that gift had been.

"Well, it's finally ready now. I hope you like it."

Harry hoped so too. After all the build up and suspense, it would be hard on Remus if he didn't. Not wanting to postpone opening the parcel anymore though, Harry carefully untied the strings, and peeled the paper back.

At first Harry didn't recognize what was in his hands. But as he held his new cherished gift away from him, he saw it for what it truly was, and almost dropped it in shock. Only Remus's quick hands saved it from destruction.

"Oh my God!" Harry cried out. Then he turned to Remus with tears in his eyes, and simply said, "Thank you."

#### Author Note:

This chapter is one half of my original Ch. 24, but I decided to split it up as it was so long. At over 59 MS Word pages in 10 pt. type, with almost ten pages of non-stop action, it was just too much to read for most people at one sitting. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised that at 59 pages, and 40,000 words, this was longest chapter in HP fanfic history! I never claimed to be a brilliant action writer, so I hope I did a good job. Lately everyone's been talking about the action scenes Joe6991 writes, and I know there's no way I can compete with that. His fics are very war-like and action driven though, and mine isn't like that, so I hope you all can accept our differences.

What else? Ah yes... A shout out goes to Ruskbyte too, for the ingenious idea of making portkeys out of hula hoops. They're the perfect shape and size for large crowds, and I just had to use it. I'm

also not satisfied with the Voldemort scene as I've written it, but I decided to post the chapter anyway as is. It will no doubt be rewritten for my Schnoogle update though, so if you thought the words a little OCC for the characters, then don't worry, so did I. I just thought you'd prefer me posting already, rather than waiting another week while I tweak that one short scene.

And what did you all think of my gifts? Believe me, not even I'm as considerate as Harry is when it comes time to buy presents. I'd much rather prefer to just get and give cash, but I know that's frowned on as being the easy way out. What can I say? I'm easy! At least now though you know why Hedwig flew to South America, and you've seen Ron's temper and jealousy start to flare up again. That will play an important part for the rest of the fic, so pay attention. Don't worry about me turning Ron into a complete prat though. I like to pick on him, but I know he'll always be a good guy, and Harry's friend, so I wouldn't dream of turning him into something else. There will be a huge conflict between Harry and Ron at the end of this fic, but their friendship will become stronger after it, and they'll be back to best buds in my sequel.

Anything else I can remember to say I'll post in my Yahoo! Group, and I'll also be having a live chat there soon. I've also got a new fic "The Best of a Bad Situation" which is being published at It's a short, smutty NC-17 piece I couldn't get out of my head, and I hope a few of you will take a look. I guess it's my way to keep PoT PG13; by writing pure smut somewhere else. That's all for now though, and I hope to make two updates in November.

Oh, and as I've taken to do lately, all review responses to my last chapter are posted in the "files" section of my Yahoo! Group. I think likes it that way, and so do most of my members. Joining is free and easy, so stop by and take a look. Link is on my bio page; just click on "homepage" to get there. Later!

Ross

## Chapter 26 – Unexpected Pleasures

“Oh my God!” Harry cried out. Then he turned to Remus with tears in his eyes, and simply said, “Thank you.”

Harry was almost afraid to touch the gift; an insecurity that Remus immediately picked up on. “Go ahead Harry; it’s okay. They’re not awake yet. I have to cast a spell first before they become sentient.”

Harry barely heard what Remus said, but the short speech broke him out of his stupor, and he began to move again. Turning the portrait in his hands every which way, Harry examined it from every conceivable angle.

It was a large portrait he supposed; measuring four feet across and nearly three feet high; but still nowhere near the size of the portraits at Hogwarts that covered doorways and secret passages. The back looked to be of ordinary canvas, and Harry could make out a small artist’s signature in a bottom corner. He didn’t know the name, but was sure Remus could tell him later.

It was the picture itself that stunned Harry. The frame was made of an ornamental dark wood molding, but the picture was one Harry had seen before. In the living quarters of his trunk, there were three large tapestries that Harry had been informed had been provided by his grandfather Harold Potter. One had been the family tapestry that Harry immediately recognized, another had been a family portrait that looked to old to be of any of his immediate relatives, and the third had been a simple countryside location, with rolling hills and a small stream passing right by a quaint cottage. It was the same scene, and the same cottage, that appeared on Harry’s new portrait. Of course, there was one large difference. The three frozen forms of his parents and Sirius Black, waiting to be given life.

“How did you get this?” Harry asked, almost scared to know the answer. If this was another secret Dumbledore had been hiding from him, he would never be able to forgive the old man.

“Well, like I said, Sirius and I were working on this gift last year. But then when he, well, when he died, I didn’t think it was right to give it to

you then. Luckily the portrait wasn't yet completed, and I approached the artist with a request to add Sirius to the painting. I had to wait until I could get my hands on his imprint, and then it was just a matter of time until waiting for Christmas. The painting's been done for about five weeks now, but I wanted to wait. This is Godric's Hollow Harry; where you lived when you were born."

Somehow the news about the home didn't surprise him. He didn't recognize it from memories or anything like that; the name just fit the description. Something else Remus said though raised a question in him. "Imprint?" Harry asked. "I don't know what you're talking about. But why hasn't anyone told me this was possible before? Don't you think I would have wanted a portrait of my parents if I knew I could have had one?"

"You don't know, that's right," Remus looked surprised. "Sorry Harry, but sometimes even I forget that you haven't been brought up with wizard customs. It's long been a practice that when a witch or wizard becomes of age, they take a mental imprint of themselves, in case they should die. Most forget about it after that, but occasionally when the witch or wizard has done something with their lives to cause acclaim, they update that mental imprint later in life. It's a bit like taking a memory and putting it into a pensieve, but instead of taking only one thought, the process takes a broader, more general impression of the person. Then when the person dies, if someone wants, a friend or relative can commission a portrait.

"That's the expensive part really, and that's why it's not a common practice. Usually only historical figures or famous wizards get commissioned, but I've been saving money for a long time, and Sirius generously contributed."

"I still don't understand how these imprints get turned into a painting though," Harry said. "And if it was so easy, only expensive, why wasn't I presented with that option for my parents a long time ago?"

"It's complicated in your case Harry," Remus informed him. He saw Harry thought he was going to dismiss his question, and interrupted him before he could say anything more.

"Just listen; I promise I'll explain. You see, you're parents gave their imprints when they graduated from Hogwarts, after they became adults. But with Voldemort on the loose, and the fighting with the Order of the Phoenix they did, updating them wasn't exactly a priority. So they never did, and I'm afraid that when they're activated, they won't remember anything that happened in their lives past the day when they gave them. I'm sorry Harry, but not only will they not know you, they won't even recognize you. Lily was two years away from getting pregnant, and I'm sure a fully grown son will be the last thing your parents expect."

"There's more too. When your parents went into hiding, they knew they might not make it out alive, and entrusted Sirius with some of their belongings. If you remember, while Peter was made the secret keeper, Sirius still remained their most trusted friend. So among the things he stored for them in his vault, were their imprints. Then days later he got sent to Azkaban, and even if I knew he had your parent's imprints in his possession, there would be no way to get them out. Only Sirius could have opened his vault, and he didn't escape until your third year."

"What happened then?" Harry asked.

"Well," Remus said with a small laugh, "after our awkward reunion, Sirius and I did some talking while he was on the run. I didn't always know where he was, but we met occasionally, and that's when I found out about your parents' belongings. We debated whether we should tell you or not, since they wouldn't remember you if they got made into a portrait, but in the end decided to go ahead and surprise you. After the events of your fourth year, we thought a portrait of them to keep you company with the Dursleys would be perfect. You know the rest from there. Sirius died, I didn't think it was right to give the gift as we'd planned, and then when you were granted access to Sirius's vault, I asked Dobby to bring me his imprint."

"That's the small box he told me about!" Harry knew right away.

"Yes, Remus smiled, "although I don't think he knew what was in it. So I gave Sirius's imprint to the artist we'd hired, and the rest is pretty self explanatory. As you can see, you're parents were painted to

appear in their early twenties, and I decided to make Sirius match. He updated his imprint several times after escaping from Azkaban, as there wasn't much else he could do locked up in his house. I believe the last time he did it was after Christmas last year, but he might have even done one after that. So while Sirius will look the same age as your parents, he'll have virtually all the memories and personality of the man we knew. I think he'll help tremendously bringing James and Lily up to speed on the times."

Harry nodded, and Remus continued.

"The process of making the painting itself is simple, really. Like I said before, an imprint is like the material you'll find in a pensieve. It's a silvery liquid, and the artist mixes it with pigment to make paint. The backgrounds of portraits are painted and charmed like normal, but the actual figures of your parents and Sirius are painted with their imprints. All I have left to do is cast the activating charm, and they should wake up."

"But then how do some portraits have more than one copy of themselves?" Harry asked.

"Well, once you have the original, it's easy to make copies. The original will always be special though. Copies lose their magic over a period of years, and the subjects start to slow down and need sleep. A few hundred years later, the magic can wear off completely. Then, all you'd have left is a normal muggle painting. I did have a single copy of this painting made. I kept that; I hope you don't mind; and I thought we could use it to communicate when we were separated."

"You mean like Phineas Nigellus does between Grimmauld Place and Dumbledore's office?"

"Yep," Remus nodded, "only I hope your parents and Sirius won't be as surly."

Harry hoped so to, and momentarily he thought of what he'd do with the portrait of the rude ex-Headmaster of Hogwarts. He supposed Dumbledore would want the painting as he had a copy in his office, but Harry was already making other plans.

"So, shall we wake them?" Remus asked.

Harry was very nervous, but quickly agreed. Remus had gone through a lot of trouble in making this painting, and he only hoped it delivered on its promise. Harry nodded for Remus to proceed.

Touching all four corners of the portrait in succession, Remus then swirled his wand in a clockwise motion, and intoned a spell unknown to Harry. A bright white light shot out the end of his wand, hitting the painted forms of James and Lily Potter, and Sirius Black in their heads. As the light faded, Harry saw that the figures slowly started to stir and blinked their eyes. It was Sirius who spoke first.

"Moony, is that you? What on earth are you doing in a portrait?" He probably didn't notice Harry, because he nervously crept to the side and became frozen again. Maybe it would be best, and less emotional, for Remus to inform them of their new situation.

"Hello Padfoot," Remus said sadly. "Lily, Prongs, it's good to see you too." The others had fully awoken now, and Sirius swung his head around to see the others just slightly behind him

"James! Lily! What on earth? But you're dead, you can't be here?" Turning back to Remus, he ordered, "You better start explaining Remus."

"Remember that gift we were working on Harry for? Well, let's just say that it got a new addition before it was completed. I'm sorry to tell you Sirius, but you died last June. It's now Christmas of Harry's sixth year in Hogwarts."

"That sucks!" Sirius admitted. He didn't say more though, because the others had become impatient.

"Remus, is that really you?" James asked. "You look so old! I don't understand what is happening. And why are you in a portrait?"

"I don't think he's the one in a portrait, James," Lily said. "Remus, we're dead, aren't we?"

Remus could only nod. At his side, hidden from the other's sight, Harry continued to cry. He couldn't see his parents, but just hearing their voices was enough to overwhelm him. He briefly wondered why they thought Remus was the one in a portrait, but reasoned that from their point of view, it could very well appear just that.

"I think you should explain from the beginning, Moony," James suggested. "None of this makes much sense to us."

Remus supposed it had to be done, and so he reluctantly agreed. It was a hard thing to do; telling your friends that they had been dead for over fifteen years; but at least he got the chance to talk to them again.

"It's not really my place to tell you everything, so I'll leave the details for later. But I will fill you in on most of what's happened. James and Lily, I'm sorry to say you were both killed by Lord Voldemort on Halloween night, 1981." Lily gasped at the name (something that Harry never thought she'd do for some reason), and James' face turned green.

Remus continued. "But something else happened that night, which I won't go much into. But the good news was that Voldemort ran into some trouble. Most people thought that he died, but what really happened is that he got cast out of his body; in the form of a spirit. It was thirteen years before he was strong enough to attempt to come back, and he was reborn in a new body, but just as evil and powerful as before. Dumbledore and the others reformed the Order of the Phoenix to fight him and his Death Eaters once more, and Sirius, you died in a battle in the Department of Mysteries under the Ministry building in June. Harry had been led there by a false vision, and he thought you had been captured. By then, there was no one at Hogwarts he could trust, so he went to save you himself along with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and some others. It was actually us who ended up saving him, but during the fight your cousin Bellatrix pushed you through the veil in the Death Chamber." James and Lily wouldn't know what veil he was talking about, so he explained it for their benefit. "The veil is an ancient artifact that has mysterious properties. The one thing we know for certain though, is that no one who's ever

passed its threshold has returned to our world. The best guess about it, is that it's a conduit to the realm of the dead. Basically Sirius, you died that night without being killed."

Pausing to let them all absorb what he said, Remus continued. "James and Lily, you're imprints were held in Sirius's vault when you died, but he was sent to Azkaban for twelve years, and we hadn't a chance to get them before he escaped. Sirius, Harry just recently gained access to your vault, so I could get to yours. At the last moment, I decided to visit the artist of this painting and have you added. I decided to paint you young again, so you'd fit in with Lily and James. I thought Harry would like it, so I hope none of you mind." He gave a small laugh then. "Don't really have a choice about it though, now that you'll be spending all of eternity together."

Sirius chuckled as well a little, but James and Lily were still too confused about the talk explained to them. And one name kept on popping up that they didn't know.

"Remus," Lily asked, "who's this Harry you keep mentioning? I don't know anyone by that name."

Remus looked to his side where the others couldn't see, and Harry met his gaze, and nodded his head. It was time to make his appearance.

Wiping the tears from his checks the best he could, Harry slowly stepped closer to Remus so that he could see into the frame. "I'm Harry," he told his parents.

Sirius was smiling at just seeing Harry alive and well, but the others reacted in much a different way. James was confused who the raven haired boy with the ponytail was, but Lily seemed to know. She had taken one look at Harry's green eyes and dark features, and placed him immediately.

The shock caused her to grab onto James's frame for support. It took another moment for her to catch her breath, but still she didn't move her eyes from looking at Harry.

"James," she breathed out, "just look at him! He's our son!"

Remus excused himself shortly after that, and Harry was left with his parents and Sirius to fill in eighteen years of history. Like Remus suggested, Sirius's own memories helped tremendously with that, especially in the earlier years before he was sent to Azkaban, and in the months leading up to his death. It turned out Sirius had updated his imprint once more after the previous Christmas; sometime after Easter. So at most, there were only two or so months he had no recollection of. But figuring in the fact that he hadn't been allowed out of the house, they all agreed that there wasn't a lot he could have missed out on.

Harry's parents demanded to hear about his life from the very beginning, as according to their memories, they weren't even married yet, let alone had a child and been killed. So Sirius told them how things had become grim in their years after graduating Hogwarts, and then Harry took over telling them all about his life. For once, he didn't mind retelling the story of how'd he become the Boy-Who-Lived, and all that had happened afterwards.

James had been saddened that Harry had been left alone with Sirius falsely in prison, and Lily had been horrified to find out he'd been brought to her sister and Vernon Dursley to live. Harry admitted it hadn't been a great childhood, but didn't mind anymore, as it was all in the past and he'd spent enough time already sulking about what wasn't fair in his life.

His Hogwarts' years were more enjoyable to tell about, at least until Voldemort had been reborn. Recounting his first and second years had been fun, as Harry greatly exaggerated details to get his parents to react. He didn't exaggerate as much as Ron sometimes did, but it was still fun to do.

His third year was more hard than fun to tell, because that's when the truth about Wormtail's guilt and Sirius's innocence came to light. James became furious he'd been duped by his former friend Peter like everyone else, and Lily reminded both Harry and Sirius that it hurt them all the more, because to their minds only the day before they

were the best of friends, and they hadn't so long to get used to his betrayal.

It took another hour to cover his fourth and fifth years, not pausing to go into detail about anything really. That would all have to wait for another time, as it was getting late, and Harry wanted to at least bring them up to speed as far as Voldemort was concerned, before he retired for the night to his Occlumency exercises. He had two week's of memories to sort through, not to mention the St. Mungo's attack, and the emotional day he'd just had. If Harry wanted to be prepared for Dumbledore the following day, he knew he had to make a quick exit.

Which is why with much sorrow he had to say goodnight to his parents and Sirius in their portrait, and leave for bed. Their painting was left in the muggle room in the meantime, as Sirius said they'd be up half the night catching up on old times. Remus had made Sirius promise he wouldn't tell James and Lily anything about Harry; that was Harry's tale to tell, and a bond that should be shared; but Sirius still had plenty of news to tell about the Potters' wedding, their careers after Hogwarts, what had happened to all their old friends, Order business, and many more things. Harry was only a little disappointed that he wouldn't be around for every conversation, but he knew it would be impractical, and that it would take more than one long conversation to tell his parents everything about his life. If he wanted to tell it right, the process would take a long time, and even then the figures in the portrait might never be the people his parents could have been if they weren't killed. Mentally at least, they were only a few years older than Harry himself, and having a child (and a famous and troubled one at that) was a lot for James and Lily to handle on top of their deaths.

It took some time for Harry to clear his mind of external thoughts, but after almost a half hour, he was able. And then the familiar process of filing and identifying thoughts took over, and Harry was in his element. Luckily most of the activities he'd done with Neville the past few weeks were filed easily as not much anything exciting had happened. The battle at the hospital got filed away with his other Death Eater captures, and the recent visit by the Grangers and Weasleys got a

whole new subset to fill which Harry decided to dedicate to all future holidays.

The rest got left behind in his outer mind sphere, and Harry smiled as he thought about what Dumbledore's reaction would be if he chose to invade Harry's mind the next day. Wanting to know how Harry had learned to apparate, or where he'd gone to, all Dumbledore might instead see was a detailed recollection of the "Rocky Horror Picture Show." With a smile on his face, Harry fell asleep.

It was bright and early the next morning when Harry woke up. No longer sore from his injuries, Harry for the first time since his vacation started felt like a morning workout; to stretch his unused muscles. He only spent a half hour in his gym though, as he still had much to accomplish before he left for Grimmauld Place.

The first thing Harry did; after a shower and getting dressed of course; was to relocate his guardians' portrait into his master suite for the time being. Just as Sirius had claimed, they were all still up (but visibly tired) talking about their childhoods, and it looked like they didn't even notice Harry. He didn't have much time to talk either, so he didn't mind leaving them to occupy themselves.

The main thing Harry needed to do before noon was interrogate his five new prisoners as much as possible, while still leaving enough time left over for a trip to Gringotts in Diagon Alley. The vision Harry had had of Voldemort discussing his Death Eaters with Lucius Malfoy still weighed heavily on his mind, and Harry knew that to keep up appearances that the captured Death Eaters were instead fleeing Voldemort's service, he had to empty their vaults as soon as possible. Usually Harry dedicated hours to each new prisoner under the influence of Veritaserum for his questioning, but that also included anything they might know about fellow Death Eaters, Voldemort's plans, a complete confession of all their crimes, locations of dark artifacts, or anything else that might be useful. Harry didn't have time for all that though, so he spent ten minutes with each new prisoner to just get their vault numbers, security passwords, and any other special instructions that might be needed. He'd have to interrogate them about the rest at a later time.

Neville was sleeping in, so after leaving his friend a note on the kitchen table saying he'd be gone until afternoon (but that Neville needed to try to contact his grandmother about his parents), Harry flooed to The Leaky Cauldron already under the influence of Polyjuice Potion to look like Chris Parkinson. Harry decided to work with him first, because he wasn't wanted by the law, and if Harry's face was spotted during his walk to the bank, he wouldn't be questioned by the many aurors still on patrol.

Harry felt a little rushed as he went about emptying his prisoner's vaults, but all his worry was for naught. Because many local merchants had bank business right after Christmas, cashing in on all the sales they'd made, there were not one, but three bank managers on duty that day, and Harry used the opportunity to alternate between them. As such, he never had to actually leave the bank while drinking new vials of Polyjuice Potion; instead he just flipped up his dark hood, and waited in another line. Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange were the final two potions Harry choose to drink, as they were two of the most familiar Death Eaters likely to be spotted. Fortune was with Harry though, as nobody reported seeing anything suspicious, and if the goblins knew of their wanted status, they didn't seem to care. As long as they got paid, Harry was learning that goblins could be trusted with virtually any secret.

Leaving the bank, Harry saw that Tonks was again on duty, but this time he choose to ignore her. He was still in the face of Rodolphus Lestrange, and thought that a known killer walking up and saying "Wotcher Tonks!" would likely get his ass cursed. It was good to see that she'd made it through the attacks unharmed though. In all the excitement of the past few days, Harry had forgotten to ask Remus who had been kissed, and who had been hurt.

It was eleven thirty by the time the last of his Polyjuice Potion wore off, and Harry was able to remove his hood and move about freely. Humorously enough, he'd spent the time wasting away eating a sundae from Florean Fortescue in the guise of a Death Eater. Being much larger and having a different body caused Harry's tastes and stomach capacity to change, and he was intrigued to find out that Rodolphus didn't like the taste of Harry's normal selection of triple berry chocolate crunch much at all; although he was able to put away

four whole scoops. When he did change back to his own self, Harry was slightly queasy for a few minutes, until the change was completed, and the ice cream had a chance to settle.

'Note to self,' Harry thought to himself. 'Never use Polyjuice Potion again on a full stomach of junk food!'

At about the same time Harry Potter was finishing his ice cream, four esteemed wizards of their individual fields were just sitting down to a meeting. Albus Dumbledore had called them to meet at Grimmauld Place to discuss his upcoming meeting with Harry; who was due to arrive in less than an hour. Knowing that he'd not handled the boy well in the last few months, he'd called his most trusted advisors in for a brief brainstorm. Basically, he needed help, and he needed it bad. In Dumbledore's mind he didn't know anything for sure anymore, except for the single fact that Harry had to be kept safe, even if he didn't want to accept it.

Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody was one of Dumbledore's closest friends, who not often gave into the pressure of agreeing with Hogwarts' Headmaster just because of his status. He was also present during the two attempts to capture Harry that Dumbledore had made; both of which had failed. Dumbledore had invited Mad-Eye along because he valued the ex-auror's experience and talents, and respected his opinion.

Severus Snape was another man at the table, although he wasn't looking too happy about being there. He too was a trusted confidant of Dumbledore's, although his advice was always taken with a grain of salt. Like a little red devil sitting upon his shoulder, Dumbledore enjoyed Snape's opinions not because he often agreed with the man, but because Severus could always be relied upon to play devil's advocate when needed. And when the subject had anything to do with Harry Potter, Snape was sure to be as unpleasant and unforgiving as possible. He'd still not forgiven the boy for embarrassing him in front of his Potion's class, not to mention what had gone on in Dumbledore's office. Helping Dumbledore separate his love for Harry, and his need to protect him, had always been the unpleasant job of Snape's. And no other could do it so well, or usually with so much joy. Yes, Snape may seem evil and bigoted, but that was only because Dumbledore had nurtured that behavior in him.

Another one of Dumbledore's regretted mistakes; one that was a decade too old to be corrected now.

Remus Lupin was the last man sitting, as he'd also been loyal to the Order during his years as a member, but more importantly because he'd been the closet to Harry recently. Even if he was unwilling (or unable?) to share with the others and his superior what Harry's secrets were, he still provided them with what little information they could gather. Why Remus was unwilling to share more information, and what Harry had held over the man to prevent him from performing his duty as an Order member, Dumbledore didn't know. But at least having Remus present could help shed light on the situation. His mere reactions to suggestions, and the issues he choose to object against, were a great indicator about Harry's location and safety. It may not be Legilimency (which was impossible against a werewolf), but at least it was something.

The only other member Dumbledore would have wished present for her council; but who was unable to come; was his Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. Publicly nothing had changed between the two in the last few weeks, but privately she had lectured his ear off for placing her in such an uncomfortable and unfair position when she attempted to stay Harry from leaving Hogwarts for the holidays. That was another problem that Dumbledore needed to address when he had more time. They'd had their issues before, and he was sure he could patch things over given enough time. He and his Deputy Headmistress couldn't both be gone from Hogwart's at the same time though, so it was a moot point for now. Even if they were on good terms, Dumbledore knew he couldn't leave the castle unsupervised, or worse yet, in the hands of some of his more eccentric staff members like Sybil Trelawney and Hagrid.

"Headmaster, if you insist on calling us together to speak about Potter once again, can we please at least get started? I have far too busy a schedule on my plate to worry about what the brat's gone and done now."

Remus was casting deadly looks at Snape for his impertinence, but Dumbledore merely smiled. He could always count on his caustic

Potions Master to cut through the pleasantries and get right to business.

"If you insist Severus, then we may begin,' he smiled. "I've called you here today because as you all already know, I made yet another failed attempt to bring Harry to a safe location yesterday. Unaware to Molly Weasley whom I visited yesterday morning, I located a parcel with Harry's name on it, and spelled his enclosed jumper into a portkey to be activated when he pulled it over his head. Harry had previously warned me against interfering with the Weasley family's visit, and so I obliged by not confronting him at the Burrow. Yet when Harry arrived here yesterday afternoon, he expressed his anger and left in less than a minute. It appears he apparated away, but I was unaware he possessed that skill yet, and it puzzles me how his use of magic has remained undetected by the Ministry. Myself, Alastor, and Severus were all present at the time, so I was wondering Remus if you'd care to shed as much light on the issue as you possibly can.

Remus wanted a detailed description of what Harry had said first, and after Moody filled him in (with some grumbling from Snape), he obliged Dumbledore's wishes.

"Well," Remus began, "Harry and the rest of us were opening our gifts around the tree when his turn to open Molly and Arthur's gift came. As everyone expected there was a jumper wrapped with some other gifts, and when Harry went to put the sweater on, he disappeared. Hermione especially thought something bad had happened, but Ron, Neville, and the twins all thought it was some sort of practical joke. Molly was hysterical of course, but Arthur managed to stop her screaming just in time for Harry's return. We didn't see him arrive; he popped in behind us; but as you said less than a minute had gone by, and he told us of what had happened. Molly and Arthur were particularly angry with you Albus for betraying their trust and invading their home with a ploy to kidnap Harry against his will, and I'm afraid you might be receiving one of her howlers before school reconvenes. Harry dismissed the incident very quickly though, and not a moment later, everyone was back to opening their gifts."

"The Granger girl was present, did you say? Albus, you never told us that," Moody growled.

"I was unaware of it myself, actually," Dumbledore admitted confused. "Elpias has been on patrol duty at the Granger residence since Hermione returned home for the holidays, and reported to me that the family stayed in and never left their home yesterday. I wonder Remus, would you tell us who else was in attendance with Harry yesterday?"

Remus thought about it, and didn't think it would hurt any. "Well, the whole Weasley family minus Percy, Bill, and Charlie were there, as were Hermione and her parents. I and Harry of course, and Neville who's been staying with Harry over the vacation. There were four others present, but I don't think I'm the one to tell who they are. You'll have to ask Harry that yourself." Remus couldn't help but smirk as he could see Dumbledore list all the possibilities on his fingers. Never in a million years would he correctly guess the unlikely paring of Dobby and Winky, and Neville's parents. Remus supposed he could have added another fifteen to the guest list as well, but that might give away too much info if Dumbledore was aware of the missing Death Eaters. So far he hadn't mentioned it at any of the Order meetings; so if he knew, he was keeping that to himself.

"Sounds like a full house," Dumbledore was surprised at the number.

"Of course," Snape sneered. "Potter can't go anywhere without his fan club, now can he?"

"And I bet you had a happy Christmas with just your close family and friends, huh?" Remus shot right back at Snape. "Severus, don't judge Harry harshly just because he has people he cares about, and people who care about him. Jealousy is so unbecoming."

Snape was ready to respond either with a cutting remark or quite possibly a cutting curse, when Dumbledore broke them up. Moody was having a good laugh at the show though, and made no attempt to help.

"Gentleman! This is getting us nowhere. Now Remus, back to Harry. Did he really apparate away from here yesterday? If I knew he was able to do so, I would have appreciated knowing that ahead of time so I could have erected wards preventing his escape."

"It's a good thing you didn't," Moody spoke up.

"And why is that Alastor?"

"If you had managed to trap Potter, he would have hated you even more than he does now. He may be annoyed with the portkey, but at the most it caused him only a minor inconvenience. To imprison him against his will however would have caused far more damage to your credibility."

"Hate is such a strong emotion, Alastor. I doubt that Harry hates me."

"Maybe not hates you," Remus agreed, "but he certainly hates the actions you've been taking lately on his behalf. And let me ask you this. What makes you think even if you had erected anti-apparition wards, Harry couldn't have found another way to leave, or dismantle the wards? With as much as he's told you to leave him alone, why do you insist that you still know better than him, even when you have no idea what Harry's now capable of?"

"Potter's capable of the same things he's always been," Snape sneered. "He gets into trouble, he flaunts his celebrity status, he's disrespectful of Hogwart's staff and rules, and he thinks just because the sun shines out of his arse, that he has the right to do whatever he wants, whenever he chooses!"

A chuckling in the corner caused all four men to turn away from a red-faced Snape, and there they found Harry sitting in a chair, obviously enjoying himself.

"See! No respect for people's privacy either!"

"Oh, shut the hell up Snape," Harry had great fun yelling. "This is my house, and if you don't like me attending a meeting that I called for, then you can leave yourself!"

Remus smiled and Moody outright laughed at the horrified look on Snape's face at being spoken to that way, but Dumbledore again interrupted them all before more insults could be traded.

"That's Professor Snape, Harry. And he was merely surprised, as we all are, of your sudden arrival. I was not expecting you to arrive for another twenty minutes."

"Well," Harry shrugged his shoulders, "I got done eating my ice cream, and saw no sense in wasting time. So I left Diagon Alley early. Hello Remus, been having fun?"

Remus nodded, but Snape was outraged. "Eating ice cream in Diagon Alley! Are you purposely trying to get caught by the Dark Lord's forces you insolent fool?"

"Does it look like I got caught? For your information, I passed right by a dozen aurors; including Tonks; and three Death Eaters that I felt without once being discovered. I'm not a fool Snape, so stop trying to make yourself look better by accusing me of stupidity."

"Harry, that's Professor Snape. I won't warn you again before I start to deduct house points from Gryffindor..."

"You can't," Harry interrupted him, which caused Moody to grin. "As Snape knows very well, I've made myself very familiar with the school's rules this year, and you and any other personal aren't allowed to deduct house points off grounds, when not on a school-sanctioned field trip. Snape's not here in any official capacity, and neither are you. So I can call him Snape, or Snivillius, or anything else I damn well please until we get back to Hogwarts! It's bad enough I have to call the man a Professor when he clearly is anything but, but I won't be forced to in my own home. I only asked to see you Professor, and I never wanted nor invited Snape to join us."

"You know very well that Professor Snape is part of the Order of the Phoenix Harry, and that we use this home as our headquarters. I must insist that you treat him with respect while he's here."

"Oh," Harry chuckled, "and I suppose he's treated me the same way? Do you know, I don't think once in six years he's called me by my proper name. Moody, you've been listening in. How has Snape referred to me since this conversation started?"

"Brat mostly," the grisly ex-auror piped up. "Fool once. He did have a few choice words to say about you though. Something about the sun shining out of your arse."

"Alastor, that's enough." Dumbledore wasn't looking too happy.

"My point's made though," Harry pointed out. "He doesn't treat me with respect, so why should I treat him with any? He's the one who's always been calling me names, since the first day of school, and now that I'm not his student, I don't have to take it anymore. So if you want him to stay, tell him to shut up and keep quiet."

Dumbledore just sighed as Snape looked on in surprise and shock that he had given in to Harry's demands. "Very well Harry. For now, we will agree. Severus, please keep your temper and displacement in check if you wish to remain in attendance. Otherwise, I'll have to ask you to leave. Please continue Harry."

"Continue what? So far, all we've done is a bunch of yelling."

"Well, assuming you were listening to our conversation, you know that we were discussing your sudden disappearance yesterday. Perhaps you would care to enlighten us how you managed to do that."

"How do you think I did it?" Harry asked.

"Looks like you apparated," Moody told him.

Harry nodded, "I did. There were no wards in place to stop me, so I just left. I knew I'd be seeing at least Dumbledore today, so I thought any explanations could last until now."

Harry's Headmaster looked confused. "But how have you managed to learn how to apparate, Harry? You are not licensed to do so, and in fact aren't even eligible for a learner's permit for another year. Furthermore, the Ministry has not detected any misuse of magic from you, and magic use is highly detectable when learning to apparate. Now that I mention it, you also implemented at least one portkey this past summer that was issued outside normal jurisdiction, and didn't

come from the Order either. Which leads me to suggest a corrupt Ministry employee has been supplying you with illegal instruction and aid which could land you in a heap of trouble.

"I'm sorry to have to do this Harry, but it's time to confess your actions. I only hope one day you realize how much this pains me. You may not have noticed, but wards have been erected to prevent your escape this time, and I must insist that you travel with me back to Hogwarts for the remainder of your vacation. Remus, you will fetch Harry's belongings and young Neville, and return with them at your convenience."

"Not bloody likely," Remus muttered under his breath. Harry snickered because he was the only one to hear his friend, and he happened to agree.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry continued on as if he hadn't just been ordered away against his wishes, "I told you I'd be coming today to discuss my sale of this house. I gave you two warnings to clear it out, the first one over a month ago. Yet the Fidelius Charm hasn't been lifted. Were you waiting for me?"

Dumbledore sighed. Turning to Moody, Snape, and Remus, he asked if they would mind waiting in another room while he talked to Harry privately. Harry didn't much care if they stayed or left, and outright said so. Snape was the first to leave however, after a pleading look from his boss. Remus left too, not wanting to test his loyalties to either man. And Moody, although he would have liked to stay behind to witness the struggle for power, reluctantly followed the others.

Once they were alone, Dumbledore let his guard drop down, and took his glasses off to rub at his eyes. Harry was surprised, because he couldn't remember a single time when the man had done that before. Harry also had to repeat his question.

"No Harry," Dumbledore informed him as Harry thought he would, "I was not waiting for you. Dissolving the Fidelius Charm protecting Phoenix Headquarters is just not an option right now. Perhaps once you graduate we can consider it then. This location still remains

secure, and it's needed to house our operations out of. Too much would be disrupted if we had to relocate to a new base."

"What operations?" Harry sneered. "What have you done all year long, or since Voldemort returned really, that has made any progress against his men besides cleaning up after my mistakes, which were caused in the first place by me not being informed about important information? The Order hasn't done a damn thing all year long except watch and wait, and the ten of you can just as easily do that out of Hogwarts or another building! Besides, you make it sound like I was asking your permission. I didn't ask you if I could sell Grimmauld Place, I told you I was selling it. I actually have to meet a real estate agent in an hour."

"That's not possible Harry," Dumbledore almost sounded angry. "Besides needing at least a week to lift the charm, I would first have to check out the background of whatever real estate agent this was, and even then, you wouldn't be allowed to sell anything. You're not of age yet Harry, and until then at least, you're not allowed to sell anything, even if this house is legally yours."

Harry didn't like that answer one bit. But he had planned for it, and took a letter out of his pocket that he hoped he wouldn't have to send. "Hedwig," he called out. In a burst of her customary colors, Hedwig appeared already perched on an empty chair, and looked to Harry for instruction.

"Hey girl," he greeted her. "Would you deliver these letters for me please. You can wait for a response as well. Thanks Hedwig." With another fire burst, she was gone; messages in tow.

"And what exactly was in that letter Harry, and who is to receive it?"

Harry took great pleasure in answering him. "That was a formal complaint made both to Minister Bones and the Wizengamot; that you've refused to remove an advanced ward from a property that you do not own yourself, nor have permission from the owner to do so on his behalf. And in case you're wondering, I know I'm a minor. That does not prevent me from making deals however. All I need to make my signature legal is a co-sign from my current guardians, who

remain much because of you the Dursleys. And as you know, just to keep me away from them, they'd be willing to sign anything I wave in front of their face. Why, I may just have them sign emancipation forms if I have the time. That way I would be of legal age, and wouldn't need to bother them ever again. Don't think that I can't sell this dump if I want to."

"Harry," he asked, "where did things go so wrong with us?"

Harry could only snort in response. Was he serious?

"Really Harry," he continued, "I know I've made my share of mistakes in the past, but I don't believe I was alone in that regard. It's been many a years since I've had to deal so closely with someone your age, and I'm afraid I'm more out of touch than I'd like. But what have I done that has upset you so much? Surely you know that the precautions I've tried to take are for your own good?"

"Do you really want an answer to that question?"

"Yes, please be honest."

"Okay," Harry lamented, "where should I begin. I think it all starts with what you just said actually; honesty. Right from the first day we met, you've been anything but. First you take me to the Dursleys to live against the wishes of my parents, and you don't even bother to check up on me for ten years, which considering how important I'm supposed to be in the wizarding world, is surprising. What's more, is that you knew I was mistreated at the Dursleys, at least somewhat. You say it's for my own good; that the blood protection I got from my aunt was needed; and that you wanted to provide for me a chance to live a life outside the fame and public scrutiny that you knew I'd one day have. Well, you don't get to use that excuse ever again! You knew damn well I didn't have a single happy childhood moment, because when I got my letter to Hogwarts, it was addressed to the Cupboard Under the Bleeding Stairs! I much would have rather dealt with a little popularity than the Dursleys for ten years, so I could care less about whatever blood magic is supposed to be there. Protection charms, which I might add, you still haven't explained to me how they supposedly work."

"Secondly," Harry was really starting to build up a good head of steam here, "is the fact that you kept more secrets when I first came to Hogwarts, that you had no right to. Do you know I had to learn about who my parents were from a photo album, and that every one of my dorm mates knew more about me than I did myself? So excuse me for being pissed when I learned out that not only did I have access to a family vault full of money, objects, talking portraits, and letters, but that you've been keeping tabs on the little spending I have been doing. What gives you the right to oversee anything I do outside of Hogwarts? You've never been my guardian, and that means you must have bribed a goblin or two to be granted that position."

Dumbledore looked ashamed, but Harry wasn't done yet. "Then when the absolute worst happens, and Voldemort is reborn in a ceremony that I was forced to participate in, not only do you not stand up to the idiot who used to be Minister, but you also have the 'good sense' to send me back to my hell-hole of a home with the Dursleys, where I spent the whole summer suffering from nightmares, and had Dudley tease me about my boyfriend Cedric, because I was shouting out at night. At least muggle schools offer counseling when kids witness violent crimes. But no, you go and send me to the three people who hate me most in the world for comfort.

"And then, when school finally starts back up, you refuse to even look at me, much less explain what's going on, and you force me to spend extra lessons with Snape of all people, who you know's been treating me unfairly ever since I started his classes. I saw you act all surprised when I showed you my memories of his treatment of me in your office, but we both know that was just an act! There's no way he could have carried on like that for over five years without you knowing about it. And even then, nobody even attempts to explain to me what Occlumency is, or why I need to learn it. So basically I blame you and Snape for not learning it in time to save Sirius.

"And then of course the real kicker comes when you portkey me back to your office just minutes after I watch him die, and you have to gall to tell me about your precious prophecy! Couldn't you of at least given me the night to grieve before dumping even more shit on my shoulder to carry? No, of course not, because that would make too

much sense. Instead you ship me off to live with the Dursleys, to repeat your mistake all over again. Is it so surprising that I decided to leave, and that I wanted to get ready to face Voldemort, which I now know I'll have to do? Duh! Any sane person would tell you of course not!"

"But what really pisses me off," Harry was almost shouting now, "is that even after a full month on my own; even after I've earned nearly top scores in every one of my subjects this year, and even after I managed to not only hide myself from you, the Order, and Voldemort's men, but defended against your pathetic kidnap attempts too, you're still under the impression that I need or want your help! Do I have the words 'pathetic looser' written on my forehead? Are you so lacking any confidence in me, that my opinions and wants about my own life don't even register in your ears? Tell me Professor, what's the single reason why I should go with you back to Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore knew what he wanted to say, but suddenly it didn't seem like a good enough answer. He said it anyway though, as he couldn't come up with a better one.

"You need to remain protected Harry."

"And what makes you think I'm not?" Harry screamed, throwing his hands into the air. "Do you consider Moody a good guard, who knows a lot about magic?"

"Yes," Dumbledore answered. He had the utmost confidence in Alastor's abilities.

"Well," Harry said, "I've been in his presence at least three times this year without him knowing it, and the twice that I was apparent, I managed to escape without incident. Do you consider Tonks and Snape professional and talented as well?"

"Yes." Dumbledore feared he knew where this was going.

"Well, I've managed to slip past them too. Plus Remus, plus McGonagall, plus Kingsley, plus half the rest of your bloody Order!"

Not to mention the many times I've slipped through your fingers. How many times have I surprised you this year Professor?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Too many to count."

"That's right," Harry agreed. "And that's only the people on your side who I've managed to avoid. I'm sure you've heard by now about the attack I survived at St. Mungo's two days ago. Does it surprise you to know that just Neville and I managed to fight off five attacking Death Eaters, including both Lestrange brothers? And I think you know I've been elsewhere this year as well; Diagon Alley during Halloween for instance. Remember how sore I was the next morning when we met in your office?"

"You couldn't have," Dumbledore gasped. "There was no sign of you anywhere, and witnesses say you remained at school the whole time."

"Witnesses can be paid to say anything," Harry told a small fib. "You'd be amazed at how just a few chocolate frogs will sway a teenage boy's mind. And I think the golden patronus I cast that night, besides saving all your asses, is proof enough that I was indeed there. I was hiding under my invisibility cloak, and the only person I really had to avoid was Moody and his eye. The rest of you were too busy defending yourself from the Death Eaters' attack to pay much attention to anything else."

"That was your patronus?" Dumbledore asked. "But I thought that Remus said it was his? I admit I was suspicious; but Harry. I've seen your patronus before, and it's neither gold nor powerful enough to destroy an actual dementor."

Not caring to hide the particular gift anymore, Harry snapped his wand out before either managed to take another breath, and raising his wand to the kitchen door, spoke aloud, "Expecto Patronum!"

As expected, the large golden form of Prongs erupted from his wandtip, and took a look around the room before waiting for instructions. Harry simply informed it to run through the door into the next room. Without dementors around, his spell wouldn't last long. It

might at least shock Snape in surprise, and give a good laugh to Remus though.

"That's....that's impossible," Dumbledore was speechless. "Harry, do you realize what you've just done?"

"Yes, and I've been capable of that and much more since before school even started. Remember how I wouldn't tell you before when or how I captured Wormtail? Well, it was at Hermione's house, right after she'd gone on vacation. I had a vision of Voldemort telling Wormtail to look for clues in her things about my location, and he went alone that night. I asked Remus to join me in stopping him, because I wanted to clear Sirius's name; something else you haven't been able to do, not that I think you really cared. We caught him all right, but we didn't expect five dementors to be with him as back up. Those were the first dementors I managed to destroy, and Remus and I have known about it ever since."

"But how has the Ministry not detected your magic use, or my..."

"The potion you spiked our pumpkin juice with?" Harry asked. "Yeah, just another of your little manipulations that I found out about. This summer I managed to come up with a counter to both. Surely you've noticed that Neville's been using magic the past few weeks, and hasn't been reported by the Improper use of Magic office? That's because I countered the monitoring spell on him, but couldn't brew the antidote to your potion in time."

Dumbledore had noticed, but chose not to respond. Of all the things he'd been informed of; it was the least surprising. "You do know you've broken several Ministry laws with all this misconduct, don't you, and that you could be brought up on charges?"

"Don't pull that card with me," Harry wasn't intimidated in the least. "I simply learned from the best. With all your illegal portkey manufacturing, dispensing of unregulated potions without parent consent, bribery of Gringotts' bank officials, and being the leader of a vigilante organization that works above the law that the Ministry tries to enforce, you can hardly shake a stick at me! I'm no more or less guilty than you are. And I hardly think that learning to apparate early,

or using magic to defend myself from Death Eaters and dementors counts as capital offences.”

“Remus wasn’t kidding then, was he? When he first visited you and said you were more than capable of looking after yourself?”

“No,” Harry replied, “he wasn’t. And honestly, at that point I had only told him a fraction of what I’d been up to. There’s more he’s just learned, and more that even you don’t know. You haven’t earned that trust from me yet, and if you keep acting as you have been, you never will.”

Dumbledore nodded solemnly, and Harry actually cracked a smile. “Did you really think sending Professor McGonagall to get me off the train would really work? You weren’t really tied up with Ministry business then, were you?”

“I was in a conversation with Minister Bones then Harry,” Dumbledore admitted, “but I might have arranged the meeting to take place at a certain time. And while I knew you would be unhappy, I never expected both you and Minerva to draw wands at each other! She still hasn’t stopped scolding me for placing her in such a position. She’s afraid it will affect her relationship with you once you return to class.”

Harry laughed. “Serves you right. I’ve already written her an apology, and I don’t have any problems on my end at least. I think you’re the one in the dog house presently.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore agreed.

The two sat in silence after that, not quite knowing what to say to each other. Harry had come clean about some of his abilities, and Dumbledore had admitted that he was in fact capable of looking out for himself. Once again; like after the press conference condemning Minister Fudge; Dumbledore and Harry had come to an uneasily alliance. Not all of their problems had been addressed or solved, but they were much better off than they had been before. There were only a few more things that needed to be covered. But neither wanted to address the topic of where Harry would be spending the rest of his holidays, or if Grimmauld Place would really be sold.

Thankfully Hedwig saved the day once again, as her brilliant flames interrupted both men from there thoughts. In her talons she held a thick parchment envelope that bore the Ministry seal, so Harry knew she had waited for and received a reply. Harry didn't even look at who the envelope was addressed to as he handed the letter over to his Headmaster.

"It's for you," Harry told him.

Fearing whom had written him a letter via Hedwig, and why, Dumbledore slit the wax seal of the Minister herself with much surprise. Reading the letter aloud, Harry was pleased to see his action had caused the desire reaction.

Dear Albus,

I'm sorry to have to inform you, but it's come to the Ministry's attention that you are currently holding wards and spells over a private residence not owned by you, and that you refuse to dispel them at the owner's insistence. As you know, such action is unlawful, and unless you rectify the situation, the Ministry will be forced to send aurors to investigate, possibly with a warrant for your arrest.

If things were kept within the Order, this could be handled internally, but I'm afraid a duplicate copy of the complaint that reached me has also been delivered to the Magical Law Enforcement Ministry, and has already been filed and made public record. The Ministry of Magic can not show favoritism in such petty matters, especially considering that it was Harry Potter who made the complaint, and we know he doesn't take kindly to Ministry cover-ups. I'm sorry that you've been burdened with this, but in accordance with our laws, you must comply immediately.

Sincerely,

Minister of Magic Amelia Bones

P.S. I'm sorry Albus, but my hands are tied. Harry made sure to deliver a copy of the letter to another office, and there's nothing I can do without making HQ's location known.

The letter Harry had sent with Hedwig was written before he and Dumbledore had come to their truce, and Harry was only a little remorseful of the Slytherin tactic he had implored to apply pressure on his Headmaster. Regardless though, it had done its job, and Harry then knew the Fidelius would soon be lifted.

"It seems I have no choice in the matter, Harry. How very sneaky of you to make sure copies of your complaint were widely spread."

"You can hardly blame me, sir," Harry replied. "With the Minister herself under your thumb, I had to look out for my own interests. Plus, if a copy of my complaint falls into Voldemort's hands, all he'll think of it is that I'm continuing to grow apart from you, and I've ordered down the spells that protect the Durselys' house. He won't know to think of Order headquarters."

"It's impossible to just 'take down the wards' surrounding Privet Drive Harry," Dumbledore lectured him. "Even if I wanted to, that magic is beyond even my control."

"I suspected," Harry admitted, but with an evil grin, he added, "but Voldemort doesn't know that, does he? So let him think that I'm going to return there next summer, and plot for a plan that will never have a chance of happening."

"You truly will not return to your relatives, if only for a week or two? Harry, no matter what other security measures you have put in place, I cannot stress enough how powerful and important the blood bond between you and your aunt could be."

Harry waved him off. "Save your breath. If you knew even half of what I've had to suffer at the hands of those people, you wouldn't even ask me that. I don't care how powerful the protection is. There're other ways to secure myself, and being in that environment is detrimental to my sanity. I've changed too much over the past year, and if I was forced to spend anymore time with my relatives, I may not be able to prevent myself from cursing them for real this time. After I got done with them, they'd be begging for a pig's tail!"

Dumbledore chuckled, as he'd been let in on the pig tail episode when Hagrid had privately confessed after his short stint in Azkaban. Dumbledore was actually surprised that Hagrid's pink umbrella held the remnants of his broken wand, although that did explain the odd apparel. Since Hagrid was cleared of any charges dating back to his own childhood, Dumbledore had even offered to replace the broken wand, and give his large friend some proper training as well. Hagrid had refused though. He was happy enough with Fang and his pets, he said, and too old to learn new tricks. Dumbledore had been mildly disappointed, but dropped the offer. If that's what Hagrid wanted, he would not intervene. He'd simply gone too long without using magic, and was more comfortable without it now. Sad.

"Alright Harry," Dumbledore finally said. "I will not press you to return to your relatives ever again. I do ask you two favors in return though. One, that you at least keep the possibility in mind that if you should ever need protection or shelter, you can always find sanctuary with the Dursleys. Your family might not be happy to see you, but I'm positive your aunt will never turn you away; no matter how many pig tails you give your cousin."

Harry laughed as he considered just how many that could be, with the size of Dudley's behind.

"Secondly, when you feel the time is right, I'd like to see for myself where you've been hiding. I have no doubt it's already well protected because not even I could find you after months of searching, but I'm sure there's still room for improvement. I'd like to offer my services to improve the wards on your new home however I can, to make you as safe as possible. I must also admit," he added with a chuckle, "that I'm dying of curiosity, as you've become particularly bothersome these past few months. I'd love to see where you now call home, and how you've managed to keep yourself hidden."

Harry had no problem with either request, as long as Dumbledore understood he wouldn't be invited over for tea anytime soon. Keeping Privet Drive as a last resort for a safe haven would be stupid not to consider, and by agreeing to show Dumbledore his home "when the time is right," he could put the visit off for years, or even decades if he chose to.

"Now how about dispelling the Fidelius Charm?" Harry asked. A quick look at his watch told him it was twelve thirty, almost an hour after he'd shown up. His meeting nearby with Shelly Autumn was only a half hour away, and he wanted to get through at least a perfunctory walk-through of the place done before then. Business done for then, Harry stood up and motioned his Headmaster to follow him. He hoped Remus was still around, as he could use his friend's help.

Not surprising either of them, Remus, Snape, and Moody were all still present in the entry hall, waiting for the cloistered meeting to end. Remus was pacing back and forth in anticipation, and Moody had conjured a chair to sit in facing the front door. Snape was a virtual statue, leaning up against the wall, not moving a muscle, while he waited no doubt for his boss to put Harry in his place. Little did he know he was about in for the shock of his life.

"Severus, Alastor. Your services are no longer required here today, and you may return home. Remus, you may stay if you wish at Harry's request, but are also dismissed from further duty today. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some runes to unscribe."

Moody disappeared without a comment (Dumbledore had dropped the wards), and Harry waved Remus over for a private discussion. Snape was a little put out of place however, as he expected the exact opposite to happen. Wanting to see Potter taken back to Hogwarts, preferably by force kicking and screaming, he was confused by Harry and Dumbledore's peaceful and agreeing attitudes.

"Runes to unscribe? What on earth does that mean?"

"It means Severus," Dumbledore calmly explained, "that as Harry mentioned and promised some time ago, he plans to sell number 12 Grimmauld Place, and I have to dispel the Fidelius Charm hiding its location. I have just been too stubborn and set in my ways to realize he was quiet serious until today. What time do you plan on bringing your real estate agent by Harry?"

"In about a half hour, sir."

"Very well. I shall have your residence freed by then, although I won't have time to dally. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get started." Harry and Remus nodded and continued with their private talk, while Snape was too surprised to say anything. It was only once Dumbledore had disappeared up the stairs that he marched his way over to Harry, hell bent on finding out what had happened in that meeting.

"Potter! What the devil have you done now? Blackmailing the Headmaster to do you bidding with no concern at all for the well being of the Order; the very people who continually save your life? I think you're ego's finally surpassed that of your father!"

"**TRAITORS! HALFBLOOD FILTHY BLOOD-TRAITORS! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! YOU DARE BRING YOUR KIND IN HERE? WEREWOLF, I'VE TOLD YOU BEFORE YOU'RE NOT WELCOME HERE! AND YOU, THE SON OF THE MUDBLOOD! GET OUT, YOU'RE DISGRACING MY NOBLE HOME!**"

"Bloody Hell," Remus whispered. He and the others had purposely been quiet while waiting so as not to wake up the unpleasant portrait, but Snape's screaming had ruined that effort. Now, Harry didn't know which person he should answer back to first. The next lines Mrs. Black yelled however made that decision for him.

"**IT'S NOT BAD ENOUGH THAT YOU KILLED OFF MY LAST SON, EVEN IF HE WAS A WORTHLESS TRAITOR, BUT NOW YOU HAVE TO SULLY MY HOUSE AS WELL. WHY DON'T YOU AND YOUR KIND JUST DIE ALREADY AND TAKE THAT MISERABLE EXCEUSE FOR A PET WITH YOU!"**

That was it! Snape could be handled later, but Harry wouldn't let anyone, not even a two dimensional portrait, get away with calling him, Sirius, and Remus such fowl names.

"Shut up you old hag!" Harry screamed. "Don't you get it? No one here follows your ideals, and we don't give a damn what you want or think you deserve. You and your side lost, and we won! Sirius died not because of me, but because your niece killed him. Just like Voldemort killed your other son! And now this house is mine, and I

can do with it as I wish! So just shut the bloody hell up from now on, and maybe we can all have some peace and quiet around here!"

Harry totally expected her to yell back, but instead something Harry had mentioned caused her to pause; her lips trembling. It looked like she wanted to ask a question, but wouldn't lower her self to beg answers from someone as "unworthy" as Harry.

"What," he yelled. "If you have something to say, just say it."

"You lying filth," the portrait answered back. "The Dark Lord would never have killed Regulus!"

Harry was pleased that she wasn't screaming anymore, which was why he let the insult pass.

"I'm not filth, and I'm not lying. Voldemort did kill your other son, and he might as well have ended your whole bloodline."

"NO! DO YOU EXPECT ME TO BELIEVE THE WORDS OF A MUDBLOOD?"

"It is true Caliope," Snape answered. Harry had momentarily forgotten that the others were still around, and even Dumbledore was perched on the stairs, enjoying the show. He must have been interrupted by all the yelling and screaming.

"Regulus had some last minute reservations about serving the Dark Lord, and was stupid enough to voice them. As an example that he must not be questioned, the Dark Lord killed him after a particularly long torture session. It was not pleasant," Snape grimaced.

"Liars, you're all nothing but filthy, blood-traitors and liars! My son would never turn his back on our Master like that." Mrs. Black, whose first name Harry guessed was Calipoe, had lost her conviction though. While she still continued to yell and curse, her heart wasn't in it anymore.

"Mrs. Black," Harry called out. She didn't hear him over her own racket though, and Harry had to yell again. "Mrs. Black!"

"What?" She growled out.

"Listen," Harry sighed. "No matter what you believe or how you feel, this is the way things are. This house is now mine to do with as I see fit, and in about ten minutes I'm about to list it with a muggle real estate agent to be sold. So you have one of two choices. As you very well know, we can't take down your portrait because of a permanent sticking charm that we don't know the password to. So you can either tell us the password and we can move you to a new location, or you can stay here on this wall, and spend the rest of eternity with a bunch of muggles and no Kreacher to look after you. It's your choice."

"Ha!" she laughed. "As if I'd believe you'd do that. Besides, there's no way in Azkaban that you'd ever sell my home to a bunch of stinking muggles. THIS IS THE MOST NOBLE AND ANCIENT HOUSE OF BLACK! DO YOU REALLY EXPECT ME TO LET A BUNCH OF MUGGLE SCUM ENTER MY HOME, LET ALONE SET UP SHOP? I THINK NOT! IF YOU THINK I'VE BEEN BAD BEFORE, YOU WORTHLESS BASTARD, YOU HAVEN'T SEEN JUST HOW MUCH I'M CAPABLE OF!"

"You won't have a damn say in the matter," Harry screamed back. "I don't give a rat's arse how you feel about muggles. I may not be able to take you down without your help, but I can certainly put up a strong muggle-repelling charm! And if you think it's fun to scream and carry on like a banshee, then you'll have your chance. With no one to hear you or even notice you, you'll be condemned to watch the lives of countless generations of muggles behind the mask of a spell. To them, this would be nothing but a blank wall. I don't think I could give you a more fitting punishment!"

"You wouldn't," she shuddered at the thought. "You wouldn't dare condemn me to that fate. Not even a blood-traitor like you would condemn me to suffer so terribly?" Her last statement came out as more of a question than a statement, and Harry knew he had won. She was scared of what he had threatened, and wouldn't let him do it.

"If you give me no other choice," Harry continued, "I certainly would. Make no mistake about it. This hasn't been your house for many

years, and soon it won't even be mine any longer. It will be sold to muggles, whether you're hanging on this wall or not. However, if you tell me the password to unstick your portrait, I promise to send you to Narcissa Malfoy. She's the last of the Black line, and I'm sure you wouldn't mind some like company."

"Harry," Dumbledore warned, "I'm afraid I can't permit you to do that. If the Malfoys were to gain any know..."

"I thought I told you, you don't get a say in what I do anymore," Harry cut him off. "I know what I'm doing, so just stay out of it."

A day earlier and Dumbledore might not have let the matter drop, but after his conversation with Harry, and the new confidence the boy had exuded, Dumbledore nodded and bit his tongue. As a last resort, he could always try to intercept the portrait before it was delivered. Hopefully though, Harry had another idea in mind, and wasn't being serious. "Very well Harry, I will leave the decision to you."

Snape was huffing in indignation, whispering in the Headmaster's ear, but Harry couldn't care less. He turned his attention back to Mrs. Black, who didn't know what to think.

"The old crack-pot will never allow you to send me to Cissy. I've seen and heard too much of what's been going on here for him to risk it."

"I don't care about what you've seen or heard. As I said, this house will be sold to muggles, so it's not like you can expose the Order's headquarters any longer. Kreacher is still bound to serve Tonks, so he won't be going with you. And I know for a fact that Dumbledore's never held a meeting in the entry hall, so I doubt you know as much critical information as you think you do. So tell me the password to unstick you, and I'll send you on your way to the Malfoys."

Harry could see she was contemplating a decision, and Harry decided to apply some additional pressure. Looking at his watch, he gave a dramatic sigh and said, "Look, I have a meeting in just five minutes. Give me an answer now, or else you'll just have to stay."

Still she refused to say anything, and Harry thought maybe she was going to be stubborn after all.

“Fine,” he said, throwing his hands in the air. Turning to Dumbledore he said, “I’ll be back soon. I expect the Fidelius Charm to be down by then?”

“It is already down Harry,” Dumbledore informed him. “I have dispelled the runes on the upper levels of the house, and that has broken the spell’s power. Removing the runes in the basement is merely a formality at this point, one which I will have to continue at another time.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, truly meaning it. “I’ll be back with a guest in about ten minutes.” Then he headed for the front door, ready to leave. Just as he grasped the silver snakehead that served as the doorknob, a retched scream brought him back to the foyer.

“WAIT, YOU VILE FILTHY BASTERD! Fine, I’ll give you the password for my portrait, if you promise to send me to Cissy today.”

“I already said I promise to,” Harry reassured her.

With another long pause, Harry learned that the password protecting the permanent sticking charm was “Praestantia,” which was Latin for superiority. Harry almost laughed at the Blacks’ superciliousness. Still, he knew the password would work, and stepped forward to remove the portrait.

“No you don’t,” Snape called out, bounding down the stairs. “Potter! I have no idea what you think you might be doing, but I cannot allow you to let Narcissa Malfoy have access to this portrait. I don’t care what you think is best! You are just a stupid boy, and have no business meddling in the affairs of men!”

“Severus,” Dumbledore warned his Potions Master. “Haven’t you learned it is unwise to upset Harry by now? This is his house, and he can do with it and its possessions as he chooses. And as Harry has so adamantly pointed out on numerous occasions, neither you nor I

have any official capacity to stop him or order him to obey our wishes.”

“You’ve finally lost it, sir! Too long have you let this brat get away with his flagrant rule-breaking and arrogant attitude. If you will not stop him from giving away the Orders’ secrets, then I will!” Snape was standing between Harry and the portrait now, with his back straight and his wand hand twitching. Harry feared he knew what was coming, and a moment later wasn’t disappointed.

Snape drew his wand, and pointed it directly to Harry’s chest with only a few inches separating the two. Harry wasn’t concerned.

“This is your last chance, Snape. This is my house, and I never asked for your presence or your opinion. Move out of the way, or I’ll move you myself.”

Harry spoke the words with a calm, yet confident voice, and for the barest moment, he thought he saw Snape waiver. Harry gave a slight smirk when he noticed, and that redoubled Snape’s convictions.

“And just how do you think you’re going to do that Potter? I’ve got my wand drawn already, and there’s no way you can win a duel with me in a fair fight. I’ve twenty more years experience than you, and as you so kindly pointed out, we’re off school grounds, and I don’t have to worry about harming a student.”

Harry just raised his hands slowly so that they were showing he indeed didn’t have his wand drawn. “You’re right,” he said, “you do have twenty years experience over me. You’ve also as a Death Eater no doubt have plenty of training in beating up and killing unarmed children.” That cutting remark caused Snape to flinch, and Harry seized his opportunity.

Bringing his two hands together, Harry caught Snape’s wand in his grip, and twisted it from the other man with ease. Within half a second, it was now trained on its owner, much to his shock.

“But you’re forgetting,” Harry smirked, “that just like most purebloods, you’re overconfident in your abilities, and don’t give muggles and

their techniques their proper respect. It doesn't take a spell to disarm a person. I warned you. Now leave my house." And then much to everyone's shock, Harry snapped Snape's wand right in front of his face; a small silver spark erupting on the man's bulbous nose.

"Wha...how..." Snape must have been very concerned over his broken wand, for he didn't attack Harry like Harry thought he would. Still, to remain cautious, Harry backed away to a safe distance, waiting to see what would transpire next.

Slowly but surely Snape raised his gaze to Harry, and the most deadly and evil look he'd ever given overcame his saddened expression. Walking very slowly, Snape approached Harry, pushing his robe sleeves up on his sinewy forearms. "That's it Potter! I won't tolerate your behavior anymore. This ends here and now!"

"I said leave my home," Harry repeated. "You're defenseless and I still have my wand. If you don't leave right now, I won't be responsible for your health."

Snape just growled. In the distance Harry could see Dumbledore coming to his senses and start down the staircase, but he was too far away to intercept Snape in time. His calls for Severus to desist likewise went unanswered.

Again though, Harry did what no one else expected him to. He felt he'd beat Snape enough for one day, and wasn't in the mood to further humiliate the man. Plus, he was almost late for his meeting, and that was the whole purpose of his trip that day. So instead of facing Snape like everyone expected, Harry just said one single word.

"Dobby?"

Pop. Now that the Fidelius was broken, Dobby and Winky were able to come to their master's call. Both had been given notice that their expert cleaning skills would be needed that day, so had been eagerly waiting for Harry's summons.

"Dobby, Professor Snape is an unwelcome guest in my home, and he is trying to attack me. Please take him back to Hogwarts castle; the

Hospital Wing preferably; and then return here. Then you can help Winky clean the house."

"Professer Snapey is trying to hurt Mr. Harry Potter sir? Then greasy professer is going to pay!"

Snape was wondering what a measly house-elf could do to him, when the small creature grabbed his shin, and the most gut wrenching feeling overtook every part of his body. It wasn't as bad as the Cruciatus, but the pain was much more long-lasting and real than the simulated pain the curse caused. Harry, Remus, and Dumbledore all heard Snape scream in anguish as he popped out of existence, and before the two arrived at Hogwart's Hospital Wing, one of the passengers was unconscious.

Dobby returned a moment later.

"Thank you Dobby," Harry said. "I know you don't like doing that, but it was the only way to get Snape to Hogwarts and away from here quickly. Please start cleaning the house as best you can. For now, just worry about dust and trash. And just like before, put any dark objects in one spot, and anything you think might be useful in another. I'll be back in a bit to help out."

"Dobby and Winky will be getting started right away Mr. Harry Potter sir." Winky said on their behalf.

"Thanks. Oh, and if you come across another house-elf, just ignore him. He's Kreacher; the bad house-elf I talked about. He's bound to serve Tonks, so let's just let her worry about him for now, alright?"

"Mr. Harry Potter sir needs not be worrying about bad house-elf," Dobby said, slightly menacing. "Dobby and Winky know just what to do." Then with another pop, the two disappeared, presumably to start cleaning.

"I see two more secrets you've managed to keep from me Harry," Dumbledore approached him. Remus was chuckling over in a corner, obviously amused at the recent events.

"Well, yes. I hired them both this past summer, as you might have guessed. Since then we've become friends as well, and I've found them both to be very loyal friends and workers."

"I should have guessed," Dumbledore smiled. "Dobby always has had a soft spot in his heart for you, and I've known Winky much prefers the work of a traditional house-elf to one at Hogwarts. It's surprising to see her in clothes though. You must tell me how you managed that one day. But how did Dobby take Professor Snape to Hogwarts, and why to the Hospital Wing of all places?"

"You heard the scream, right?" Harry continued his answer, "House-elves are capable of taking passengers along with them when they pop; much like forced apparition, but it is very painful for a wizard or witch. Something about wizarding magic conflicting with house-elf magic, and the pain is a manifestation of that conflict. The one other time I've seen it, the passenger passed out from the pain as he arrived. After his trip, Snape will no doubt need a few healing draughts.

Dumbledore lost his smile as he listened to Harry's explanation. "Must you have added injury to insult Harry? After breaking his wand, Professor Snape was hardly in a position to be a threat. You do know, don't you, that with the single exception of snapping a wand upon a student's expulsion, that snapping a wizard's wand is the most insulting action one could possibly make?"

"I know," Harry nodded. "But after six years of insults from him, I don't much care about his pride. I asked him to leave, and I gave him plenty of warning; as did you. If he's too stubborn to listen, that's his own damn fault. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a portrait to see about."

Turning back to Mrs. Black, Harry waved his wand and intoned the counter spell to the permanent sticking charm; adding the unlocking password at the end of the incantation. As the charm had been left undisturbed for over a decade, Harry could actually feel the magic of his counter charm battling with that of the portrait's. Finally though logic and magic won out, and the portrait tipped to one side before falling away from the wall completely. Harry just managed to catch it

before it fell to the ground, and noticed with vague shock how white the wall was behind where the portrait had hung.

"Now you send me to me niece right this instance," Mrs. Black demanded. "You promised, and I gave you the password."

"I may have promised," Harry answered back, "but we never shook on it." As Mrs. Black looked up at him from her position between his hands, for the first time she noticed the satisfactory glint in his eyes.

"NO! YOU FILTHY MUDBLOOD LIAR! I DEMAND YOU SEND ME AWAY AT ONCE, OR PUT ME BACK IN MY RIGHTFUL PLACE! KREACHER! KREACHER, WHERE ARE YOU? YOU'RE MISTRESS NEEDS YOU!"

Much to her dismay, Kreacher didn't come. The portrait of Sirius's mother was a bit shocked by that, and turned to Harry again.

"What do you do to him you despicable boy? Where is my Kreacher?"

"I have no idea where Kreacher is," Harry answered honestly, "and I don't much care. He must have known I wouldn't be too happy to see him, and decided to stay away from me. In fact, I've been seriously contemplating mounting his head on a wall the past few days; I still might. You've got your own problems to worry about right now."

"You promised..." She lamely whined.

"And as I said, we didn't shake on that promise."

"What the hell does that mean!" She yelled back.

"It's a muggle custom; that when a verbal deal is made between two people, they shake hands to seal their pact."

"HOW IN MERLIN'S NAME AM I SUPPOSED TO DO THAT?" She screamed. "I'M A PORTRAIT; I DON'T HAVE HANDS TO SHAKE WITH!"

“Well, I’m muggle raised, and you should have thought of that before giving me the password, you stupid bitch!”

Mrs. Black looked shocked at Harry’s sudden use of vulgarity, but not even that prepared her for what happened next.

“If portraits’ have an afterlife, I hope yours is filled with screaming banshees.”

Then, just as cold and callously as Harry had snapped Snape’s wand, he brought his hands down to either side, kicking his knee through the center of the canvas. With an almighty shriek the magic of Caliope Black’s one and only portrait gave a final protest, and then bled all over the floor. With the canvas torn and the frame smashed to pieces, Mrs. Black was no more.

Harry was breathing hard as he watched the torn parts of the canvas still, and it was a whole minute later that he cast the broken frame in a corner, hopefully to be burnt.

“I was worried you were truly going to send Mrs. Black to the Malfoys,” Dumbledore piped up after awhile, sounding somber, “and I’m glad to see you had other plans. But again Harry, did you have to act so maliciously to an addled old woman?”

“That wasn’t a woman,” Harry responded. “That was just a portrait; canvas and paint. The woman died a long time ago, and that monster should have followed her the moment you came into possession of this house. I don’t believe for a moment that you couldn’t overcome the spells of a simple permanent sticking charm, so I know this was just another of your manipulations. Probably to keep decent people away no doubt, so that you’d always have control over what happened here. In destroying that painting, I was only doing what countless others, her son included, wanted to do themselves. Don’t even try to make me feel guilty! It wasn’t as if I was going to hand her picture over my bed. What else could have possibly been done?”

“Nothing, Harry,” Remus commented from his place. “And I think Sirius would have had a blast watching you trick his mother like that. Don’t feel bad about it for one single second.

“Very well Harry,” Dumbledore gave his goodbye, “I’ll bother you no more about it, and see you when you return to Hogwarts. But please, give Professor Snape as much room as you can upon your return, and I’ll ask him to do the same. Although you no longer take his class, you must still learn to live together in the castle without constantly being at each other’s throats.”

“I’ve never started a single discussion with him, so if you keep Snape on a leash, I’ll have no problem.”

Dumbledore tutted at Harry’s choice of words, but left after saying goodbye to Remus as well. Harry likewise shared a few words with his friend (he wanted Remus to help Dobby and Winky if he was willing, and see if the Black family tapestry would come down with the same password), and he left to meet Shelly Autumn a moment later.

When Harry apparated two miles away, his watch informed him that he was ten minutes late already for his appointment. He hoped the agent would still be there, and sure enough, when Harry rounded the corner out of an empty alley, she was patiently sitting on a park bench.

“Mrs. Autumn?” Harry approached her.

“Ahh, Mr. Potter! So glad to finally meet you. And please, call me Shelly.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Harry said warmly. “And it’s Harry, as well. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Not a problem,” she waved his excuse off with a hand. “People are always running late in this business, and I daresay for a meeting with Harry Potter, I would have camped out overnight.”

Harry sincerely hoped she was kidding, but didn’t comment about it.

“The house is less than two miles from here, and I thought we might walk. Along the way I can explain to you some of the specifics about what I want done.”

"Sounds good to me," she agreed. "I could use to stretch my legs. I'm just glad I brought my winter coat. It's been getting very cold lately."

She was right too. The temperature was still below freezing, and a light snow was falling around them. Harry was only wearing pants, a jumper and shirt, and a medium jacket, but he had placed a warming charm around him upon arriving in the alleyway. He offered the same to Shelly, and she graciously accepted. Being a squib she wasn't able to cast one herself, but she sure appreciated magic when she got the chance.

While the two walked the short distance, Harry briefly explained the history of the house, as far as he knew it, and why they weren't able to meet there personally. Shelly wasn't familiar with much advanced magics, but after a quick explanation, understood the basics of the Fidelius Charm. It was good Harry had taken care of that, she said, because her wizard subcontractors no doubt wouldn't have been able to.

In kind, Shelly explained to Harry the information she had researched about the general neighborhood. A hundred years ago it had been a prominent place to live; accounting for the spacious brownstones. During the second World War however the area suffered massive aerial attacks, and had been left in ruin for years. When the war was over, the buildings were repaired or replaced as best they could be, but by then all the wealthy families had already moved out. Subsequently each brownstone was divided up into smaller, more affordable flats. Over the years the area continued to suffer, until in the last ten it had reached an all time low.

But a new legislation act two years previous designated the buildings historical landmarks, and called for their refurbishment in an effort to clean up crime in the area. With no doubt the only undivided brownstone in the area; a neighborhood that was experiencing prosperous times once again; Shelly informed Harry that she had high confidence she's be able to find a suitable buyer in no time at all, and he might stand to make a fair profit. Harry told her he wasn't much interested in the money, as long as the home went for a fair

price. Since he had inherited the property himself, and never spent a knut, even the smallest sum would be pure profit for him.

When they finally made it back to number twelve Grimmauld Place, Harry enjoyed being able to look at the outside of the building in comparison to the others without having to rush inside under the cover of night. Compared to number thirteen and eleven, it was true that number twelve did seem more whole and as the designers originally intended. Briefly Harry wondered how and why the Black ancestors had decided to purchase one of the muggle made homes with so many close neighbors, but didn't give it much thought. The Blacks had been there for over a hundred years, and even Mrs. Black wasn't that old when she had died. Maybe Phineas Nigellus could tell him?

Once back inside the foyer, Harry relished the relative quiet with Mrs. Black's removal. The broken portrait's pieces that he'd cast in a corner were gone, and once again Harry was amazed at the speed and thoroughness that Dobby and Winky were able to clean.

"Well, let's start with a general walkthrough, shall we?" Shelly asked.

"Good idea," Harry answered. "You know, I haven't even seen every single room in the house yet. I've only been in about half."

So with a plan in hand, the two descended to the bottommost levels to begin their work. As Harry and Shelly walked from room to room, they were pleasantly surprised that not only were the rooms free of dust, dirt, and cobwebs, but all the broken down furnishings had been removed as well. All of the wood floors had been given a nice shine, and the walls looked still wet from a fresh coat of paint.

In the kitchen the cabinets and pantry were bare, and all the cooking utensils Mrs. Weasley had purchased on behalf of the order were missing as well. The large wide table and chairs remained, but all signs of life and personal touches had been removed.

All throughout the lower floors, every room was the same. The drawing room was devoid of the thread bare green sofas that once

belonged there, and only the newer furniture the Order installed remained behind.

"Mr. Potter, sorry, Harry. I was led to believe that this home would be needing a lot of work and maintenance."

"Up until twenty minutes ago, it did," Harry said, just as surprised. "I left a friend and two house-elves behind to tidy up some, but I never imagined they'd get so much accomplished. Believe me, this place looked nowhere near as good when I left to meet you."

"Perhaps you could arrange an introduction then?" Shelly suggested. "If I could meet your helpers, and they could give a report on their progress with the house, then we'd better comprehend where we stand."

Harry had no complaints, and at their call, Dobby and Winky appeared in a puff of smoke.

"Yes, Mr. Harry Potter sir? You called for Dobby and Winky?"

"Er, yes Dobby. I was just wondering how much you've done so far with the cleaning? And where's Remus by the way?"

"Mr. Reemy has just left to take Buckybeaky back to Hogwarts," Dobby informed him. "Mr. Reemy was getting in the way of Dobby and Winky's cleaning, but please don't be telling him that sir. Buckybeaky needing to be released anyways sir, so Dobby and Winky could properly clean all of the house. Is Mr. Harry Potter sir pleased so far?"

"Ah, yeah. Wow! It's amazing really. I never thought you could get so much done so fast. This place looks great!"

Dobby was beaming with pride, and Winky was looking a little apprehensively at the strange woman.

"Oh; sorry about my bad manners. Dobby and Winky, this is Shelly Autumn, who'll be selling the house for me. Shelly, this is Dobby and Winky, the two best house-elves a wizard could ask for. Winky, we

were just wondering what you've gotten done so far, so Shelly will know what extra work she'll have to subcontract out. Could you tell us please what you've done so far?"

Winky nodded, and was a little slow to start. But once she did begin to talk, it was obvious she was just as proud of her work as Dobby was; if only a little less enthusiastic.

"Yes Mr. Harry Potter sir. Dobby and Winky started cleaning the house from the ground floor upsy, like Mr. Reemy said to. Dobby banished all broken, old, and dirty things, while Winky mopped the floors and cleaned the walls. Dobby was on look-out for anything special to put in one of Mr. Harry Potter's piles, but Mr. Reemy said to get rid of most everything else. All the ground floors have been cleaned, and Dobby and Winky only have three bedrooms and the attic left to do. Dobby has made two piles in the library as Mr. Harry Potter sir has asked. Winky has also, at Mr. Reemy's suggestion, changed all snake doorknobs and light fixtures into normal shapes. Dobby be wanting to make the new door knocker look like Dobby's face sir, but Winky managed to stop Dobby in time.

Harry laughed as he could only imagine a brass knocker sculpted to look like Dobby's head. "Thank you Winky; that would have been very odd. And thanks for such wonderful work." Turning to Shelly, Harry asked her if she had anymore questions. She did.

"Winky, did you disable or detect any type of charms or wards throughout the house while you cleaned?"

"No Missus," Winky answered. "Winky and Dobby did not disable any wizarding magic, but Winky did detect strange feelings around the windows while Winky was cleaning them. Winky knows the feeling well, and thinks they are muggle repelling spells."

"Probably," Shelly agreed. "In old pureblood homes like this, they usually cast as many charms and wards as the Ministry would let them get away with. No doubt some maintenance prevention spells on the outside of the building as well to prevent weather damage, and perhaps circulation charms to get the air moving in this huge home. Pretty standard really, and I might not even bother taking them down."

I can assure you I'll have a team of specialists give this place a close looking-over though, to make sure they don't miss a thing." On their walk over, Harry had informed her that at one point the house had belonged to a very prominent dark family, who weren't beyond hurting muggles in their spare time. He made sure she understood he wanted the house made perfectly safe before muggles could be shown inside.

"Thank you Dobby and Winky," Harry told them. "You can start on those last rooms now." They smiled back at him, and with another pop, were gone a second later.

"So, what do you think?" Harry asked.

"Well," she said, "from the looks of things, I don't think you have much to be worried about. Every room is spotless and nearly empty, and I'm sure that Dumbledore lifted most of the harmful and dangerous spells when he moved you and your friends in here, so I doubt my spell team will have much work. Most of the preparation will be wiring the house to work off electricity and muggle utilities, and installing appliances throughout the house."

"Oh yeah, I have some of those. I'll have Dobby deliver them before I leave, but I've got four sets of top of the line appliances. Refrigerators, stove tops, ovens, washers, driers; water heaters; you name it. Please install them where you want, and sell the rest separately. You can keep the money yourself as a bonus."

"Really, top of the line you say? A complete set of appliances would go for over 10,000 pounds!"

"I know," Harry grinned. "Like I said, consider it your bonus. I've no need of them anyway. I actually gave a complete set away as a Christmas gift because I know a guy who loves to take apart anything muggle. The cost really doesn't bother me."

"Okay," Shelly whistled, "I won't complain with that! Anyway, like I was saying, most of the work will be converting the house to work on muggle utilities. There's no sense planning to sell the house furnished, as it's mostly bare now, so we'll just go like this. Any furniture that

does stay behind I'll just include in the price as an added incentive. But unless my spell team turns up something completely unexpected, I should be able to start showing the home by the middle of next month. And with a house this size, in such good condition, I'd say we'll have no problem with a base asking price of at least a million pounds. You stand to make a good sized fortune here Harry."

"A million, really?" Harry had no idea.

"At least, maybe as much as one and a half. Harry, don't you realize how large this home is? With four floors plus a basement and cellar, nearly a dozen bedrooms, a library, a drawing room, professional grade appliances, and an attic large enough for serious storage, this house is quite the find."

"Er, I guess so," Harry agreed. "I guess being at Hogwarts for so long has just skewed my perception lately." Well that, and his opulent own Hideaway. Shelly didn't know Harry had made such a pad though.

"If there's nothing else, I'd like to look around closer, and make some notes. You might be bored, so don't feel you have to accompany me. I'll also need you to sign a consent form before you leave, and I'll leave another form for your guardians to co-sign. After that, all I'll need is the key to the front door, and we'll be set to go."

"Okay," Harry replied. "I don't know if a key to the front door even exists, but I can go transfigure one now. I'll sign the consent form when I give it to you. I can also have my guardians' signature by the end of the holidays. Will that be soon enough for you to show the place in mid-January?"

"Yup, just as long as I have it before we begin any construction. My teams can do the spell walk-through though. As they use magic to wire and plumb the house, construction doesn't take nearly as long as you think."

"Alright. I'll leave you to your notes then. I'll be in the library if you need me, which is on the third floor. Or you can just call for Winky or Dobby for assistance. See you later."

"So long," Shelly said, but she wasn't facing him. Already her face was in a notebook, furiously taking notes.

Crafting a key to the front door didn't take long, as Harry had to transfigure the lock into a simple mechanism as to do it. Shelly explained her contracted workers would be installing high grade muggle locks during construction, and the temporary key was only to allow her initial access.

In the library, Harry found what he was looking for. The two small piles on the floor that Dobby had collected weren't as intimidating as the ones he'd made from the vaults, and already Harry could see a few objects he could identify and some that he might have use for.

Something else he noticed, and was very pleased with, were the many books adorning the shelves of the Black family library. When Harry had stayed at Grimmauld Place two summers ago and at Christmas, he and his friends had been restricted access of the library because of the dangerous nature of most of the books. Hermione had been most displeased, and only because she was kept busy with housework did she let the matter drop. Now though Harry counted at least a thousand books; a substantial personal compilation; and couldn't wait to sort through the addition to his own collection.

"Mr. Harry Potter sir?" Dobby spoke up from behind him. Harry jumped slightly in surprise, and took a deep breath when he realized it was just his small friend, and not a dark object acting up to kill him.

"You scared me Dobby! What can I do for you?"

"Winky has found most unusual object in her cleaning, and Winky and Dobby are not sure what it is or what to do with it. It is looking to be dangerous, but it too big to be moved in pile. It is also being very shiny however, and Dobby thinks Winky is liking it very much because so."

Harry couldn't imagine what in the world Dobby and Winky could come across in Sirius's home that they wouldn't recognize, as they had spent much more time in wizarding homes than he had. Still, he

was just as curious as the elves were, and followed Dobby to what used to be Sirius' room. Again, the room was gutted; all of Sirius's personal things already transferred to his vault before Harry inherited it.

"By the way Dobby, where is Kreacher hiding out. I still don't know what to do about him, and I'm hoping I can ask Tonks to send him to Hogwarts at least temporarily. Have you seen him?"

"Mr. Harry Potter sir will not be having to worry about nasty bad house-elf again, sir. Kreacher is gone, and Kreacher will not be causing more trouble."

"Gone?" Harry got real worried. Had Dobby kicked him out of the house much as Sirius had ordered last year, and Kreacher was free to roam? Oh, Dumbledore wouldn't like that at all. "Dobby, what do you mean gone?"

"When Master Harry Potter sir told Dobby and Winky about nasty Kreacher, Dobby knew what needed to be done. Kreacher was a bad elf who betrayed his master, and Kreacher was punished the house-elf way. Kreacher will not be heard from again!"

Harry was surprised with the amount of anger in Dobby voice, and that led him naturally to suspect the worst. Had Dobby done what Harry himself dreamed on, and mounted his head on the wall? He had to know.

"Dobby," Harry asked carefully, "did you kill Kreacher?" He was almost scared to hear an answer.

"It is the house-elf way sir," Dobby nodded without hesitation. "Dobby realized that nasty Kreacher was serving Missus Tonksy, so Dobby and Winky have pledged their first born kiddie elf to replace in her service. Does Mr. Harry Potter sir think that Missus Tonksy will be satisfied at Dobby and Winky's offer?"

Harry thought she'd be appalled, but didn't say so. So this was how house-elves ented into slavery all those years ago? The book he had

read had been sketchy at best on the details, and much like the tales about white phoenixes, had put forth more than one possibility.

"I don't know, Dobby," Harry answered honestly. "To tell you the truth, Tonks never really wanted Kreacher in the first place; she sorta just got stuck with him. So I'd be willing to bet she wouldn't want to take your kidde elf, and would be happy enough just to be rid of Kreacher. I'll ask her next time I see her, alright, and let you know."

That idea was fine with Dobby, and surprising Harry, didn't try to force his kid on Tonks repeatedly. Either it was just another of his strange quirks, or wizards must normally never refuse offers like that and he didn't know what to do, because Harry couldn't see another option with the world's views on house-elves as he knew them.

It was only a few more steps to the door, and as if he never just admitted to killing one of his kind earlier in the day, Dobby went back to the matter at hand.

"Winky was cleaning out spare closet," Dobby explained, "when Winky noticed an empty space behind a loose wall. Winky asked Dobby to help be moving the wall, and inside Winky and Dobby found a secret room magically expanded and warded. Lots of shiny and dirty things inside the room, and Dobby has never seen them before, so Winky thought it best to come get Mr. Harry Potter sir."

A secret warded room in Sirius' closet? Now Harry was really interested. And what could have filled a whole room that the elves didn't recognize? What the room turned out to be however, was highly recognizable to Harry. While not seeing one at the Dursleys (their's was too clean and orderly to be a working one), Harry immediately took in the greasy, oily look of a well used garage will a multitude of tools. Wrenches, hammers, screwdrivers; all were strewn about, and only half of them Harry recognized. What was displayed in the center of the room however; clearly the shiny object Winky had been fascinated with; couldn't be mistaken.

It was a motorcycle, and a beautiful one at that. Colored a deep brick red not unlike Gryfindor's own house color, the bike was accented with polished chromel and supple black leather accents. It had a

decidedly odd fashioned look to it even though it was obviously new, and unlike gaudy stretched choppers Harry'd seen on the telly, or cheap oriental racers that Dudley affectionately called "rice burners," this bike was a true combination of power, grace, and style.

"Is it dangerous Mr. Harry Potter sir?" Winky asked from where she was cowering behind his leg.

"Only if you're not wearing a helmet, Winky," Harry joked.

Was this Sirius's old motorbike that he'd leant Hagrid all those years ago? No, it couldn't be. This one was way too new looking and modern to be so old, and hadn't Hagrid once said that the bike had rusted and gone feral many years ago, and escaped into the Forbidden Forrest? Yes, Harry was sure he had, because Ron had made a joke about the motorbike and his dad's Ford Anglia meeting and having babies.

"It's alright Winky, Dobby. It's just a motorbike. It's like a muggle car, only made for one person. Sorta like a broomstick for wizards instead of a magic carpet. Sirius used to have one I know, but that's long since rusted and broken down. I guess he was building another one here though in his spare time. Locked up in this house, Merlin knows he had plenty of it."

Dobby fidgeted with the greasy tools just in his reach, so close yet not cleaned or organized, and Winky came out from behind Harry to pet the bike's exhaust. Harry held in a small laugh as she admired the chrome. It was so shiny and spotless, he supposed the wizarding world didn't have anything like it.

"Dobby, I've got an idea. Can you pop into my bedroom real quick back at the Hideaway and bring my new portrait here? Please be very careful though. I don't want anything to happen to it."

Dobby looked very pleased with Harry placing such trust in him, and nodded before popping away. Moments later he returned with the large portrait teetering gingerly in his small hands.

"Hello," James called out. "Who's there? Someone speak up! I can't see a bloody thing but the ceiling!"

Harry laughed as he took the portrait from a nervous Dobby, and propped it up on a large tool chest.

"Sorry Dad; just me. I need to talk to Sirius real quick. Can you go get him?" Harry would have called for his godfather himself, but in the distance he could see Padfoot the dog playing in the small stream, biting at small fish that swam by. James agreed, and it took a moment for him to walk into the background of the portrait, and call his friend away from his games. Lily had also come out of the small cottage, and joined the two men as they walked back within speaking distance of Harry.

"Harry! Good to see you! You missed a hell of an interesting conversation last night. I hope you don't mind, but I couldn't wait to tell your dad about how amazing you are at Quidditch. He was disappointed you weren't a chaser until I told him how brilliant a seeker you are, and that you have a nearly flawless record. I didn't tell him any game details though, and I still don't know about those that you've played this year."

"That's alright Sirius," Harry smiled back. "I'm playing my best yet this year anyway, so the past games don't seem so great. But that can wait for later. I'm at Grimmauld Place, and Winky found something I was hoping you could help identify."

Sirius's mood changed drastically as he heard where they now were, and everyone picked up on it. Lily and James had been informed that Sirius' childhood home had been given over to the Order to use, and now Harry owned it.

"Don't worry Sirius, I'm selling the place." That cheered him right up. "But in cleaning everything, Winky found this." Then Harry pointed over his shoulder, and moved out of the way so the others could see.

"My Indian!" Sirius yelled. "Wow! I must have finished it before I died. It looks great. Harry, could you move us a bit closer?"

Harry did, and allowed Sirius and James to converse in excited tones for a few moments before he tried interrupting them with a loud cough. Neither man noticed.

"Don't even try," his mum told him. "Sirius has always been obsessed with muggle motorcycles, and unfortunately it was a trait he managed to pass onto your father while they were in school together. Even Remus and Peter became slightly interested, although not as much. Sirius won't even hear you until he's finished explaining everything about the bike to James."

"Well," Harry said, "Since it's too late to paint a bike into your portrait, and the motorcycle is here with me in the real world, maybe I should hear about it too?"

Lily muttered something under her breath about "not another one," but after smacking her boyfriend and Sirius on the back of their heads, managed to turn their attention back to Harry.

"Sorry, but I really need to know what to do with this. I've got to clear the place out, otherwise it might get sold with the house. So Sirius, what can you tell me about this bike?"

"Well Harry," Sirius instructed him eagerly, "as I was just telling James here, that bike before you is no other than a genuine Indian Chief motorcycle. Indians are an American company that made great bikes in the early part of the century, but stopped shortly after World War Two. The Chief is a model type. I've always thought they were the coolest looking bikes around, but they were always hard to find. But just a few years ago the Indian company started back up, and trapped in this house with nothing else to do, I decided to build me another bike. Dung managed to smuggle in most of the equipment and tools I needed, and I waited nearly three months for the bike to be shipped from America itself. The hard part was portkeying it in past Dumbledore, and setting up the warding in this room so I wouldn't be detected, but the magical modifications I made were all pretty easy. Remember my old bike, James? I managed to get that one flying and operational just before you died. So having all the know-how already, all I had to do was wait for parts."

"You mean this bike can fly?" Harry asked, astonished. Of course he knew it as possible, as it had been done before, but now that the bike was essentially his, Harry was liking the idea all the more.

"Not only can it fly," Sirius admitted proudly, "but it can do a lot more if I finished it as planned. See the five colored switches on the dash Harry?"

Harry did, and nodded for Sirius to continue.

"Well, the green switch causes the Indian to fly, just like my old bike. You steer just like normal, except that you can also push the handlebars forward to dive, and pull them towards you to climb. It doesn't move nearly as fast as that Firebolt of yours Harry, but it can still fly at a respectable pace."

Harry hadn't told Sirius about his new broom yet, but decided now wasn't the time. Sirius moved on.

"The blue switch makes the Indian and its rider invisible. Kind of a necessity when you're riding in populated areas. It works better than a disillusionment spell, and it also makes the bike perfectly silent. No sound from the motor or the exhaust, although the rider can still be heard if he talks.

"Now the black switch is strictly for when you're parking the bike in a muggle area, and don't want to get ticketed or noticed. It's a high level muggle repellent charm, just like the one that surrounds Hogwarts grounds. Any muggle won't see the bike with the switch activated, and if they get within two feet, they'll suddenly have the overbearing urge to kiss the closest Bobby they can find. You can use it to get out of a ticket if you get pulled over as well, and I think watching the Bobby try to kiss himself would be rather fun"

Harry laughed. It was just like Sirius and his prank-like ways to make innocent muggles snog policemen unaware, or better yet, to snog themselves.

"So with that switch activated, you never have to worry about the Indian getting impounded or stolen. The last switches are the red and

yellow ones, and to be used only in an emergency. Since it's hard to handle a wand while riding a bike, I built in a ready to use stunning spell that will surround the bike up to five meters. It packs quite a wallop, so be careful. Of course the rider is immune as long as he's sitting on the seat, but anyone else nearby will be stunned for at least half a day. It can be real dangerous if you were to stun someone riding a broom mid-air, but that's kinda the reason why I made it. In case of an attack, you could stun whoever was bothering you, and get away.

"Likewise," he continued, "the yellow button creates a shield around the bike, which is much stronger than a normal Protego spell. It can't protect against Unforgivables, but nearly everything else it should manage to stop cold, or at least deflect. Don't engage the shield when friends are nearby though, because it protects from magical and physical attacks all the same. Walking into the shield is like walking into a brick wall, so be very careful one again. The only drawback is that I never figured out how to activate both the shield and the stunning spell at the same time. So it's one or the other I'm afraid, unless I discovered something new the last months of my life."

Harry was impressed with the bike's features, and if he was honest with himself, a little surprised that Sirius had done so many powerful modifications. The type of spells he was talking about were hard to cast with even a wand, and Harry was supposed to assume the Indian could create them with no additional magic needed? Apparently Lily had the same thoughts.

"How's that possible Sirius? The flying and invisibility charms don't surprise me, but the power required to repeal muggles, or create the shield and stunning spells you described can't be harnessed in an object. Even if it were possible, the spells would dissipate eventually, and Harry doesn't have the expertise to repower the bike."

"That's where you're wrong." Sirius said, grinning.

"I have the expertise?" Harry asked, clearly confused. He didn't know a damn thing about bikes except what they looked like. Yes, this was a very impressive model, but any fool could see that.

"No, that's not what I mean. Although I'm sure with enough training and time you could learn it Harry, I was talking about the bike."

Sirius's comment about time and training made Harry grin, as he still hadn't shared his time travels with the portrait's occupants, and he planned to before his return trip to Hogwarts.

"Harry," instructed Sirius, "open the gas valve on the tank. It unscrews clockwise."

Harry did what he was told, and was surprised when he saw not the gaping cavity he expected, but a small circle he didn't.

"Now Harry, press your thumb in the circle, and repeat the phrase, 'Padfoot rides again.' I hope I haven't keyed the password to a specific signature yet, so the password alone should release the clamp on the underside of the gas tank."

Harry followed the instructions, grinning as he repeated the colorful password, and heard a faint click from underneath the metal container.

"Now Harry," Sirius explained, very slowly, "gently lift the tank's top up on its hinges, but whatever you do, don't touch a thing you find inside. It could be dangerous for both you and the bike."

Harry complied, greatly interested in what he would find. Wasn't there normally gas inside a gas tank? Harry supposed if it was so important not to disturb, the bulk of Sirius's magical modifications must be housed in it instead. So what powered the engine then? He found out a moment later.

"Sirius, you crazy bastard," James called out once he saw inside the tank, clearly impressed. "I know we always talked about something like this, but I never thought you'd have the balls to go ahead and do it!"

"James," Lily scolded. "Watch your language in front of Harry! I know you just met him, but he's your son! And Sirius; you really are a crazy bastard, aren't you? Excuse me Harry, I didn't mean to swear."

"It's okay," Harry said, pleasantly surprised at hearing his parents curse, "but what's the big deal. And what on earth is that thing?" Harry had no idea what the fuss was about, as all he saw was a large red mass with wires and metal probes sticking out of it.

"That Harry," Sirius proudly explained, "is why I'm indeed what your parents claim; a crazy bastard. A lot worse, probably. You see Harry, to power the Indian without the need for petrol or maintenance, I could have normally charmed the parts like Arthur Weasley did his old car. I did the same with my old bike actually. But with just that alone, like Lily said it would have been impossible to cast effective shield and stunning spells. This bike was to be my reason that Dumbledore would let be participate in Order business outside of Grimmauld Place again, so I wanted to make sure I wouldn't ever suffer from a lack of power or protection."

"So to power the Indian, I needed a proper magical source. I couldn't very well run the bike off my own magic, as that would be physically draining, so I came up with another solution."

"That's one way to put it," Lily retorted. "Another is to say you risked a hundred year sentence in Azkaban by illegally using a dragon's heart to power what amounts to no more than a toy!"

"A dragon heart?" Harry asked nervously. "A while bloody dragon heart? Are you mad Sirius?" It had been explained to him in Care of Magical Creatures class that dragons as immensely magical creatures, had long ago been hunted for their hides and organs. Since the late fourteenth century however the International Conference of Wizards had outlawed all forms of dragon hunting, and the only times their hides or organs (heart and blood included) could be harvested was when a dragon naturally expired. It was for those reasons that the first dragon colonies were created; not just to keep them from muggle eyes, but also to be ready on hand in case a dragon died to harvest their raw materials. That's why dragon hide as clothing and dragon blood as a potion ingredient were so expensive; because the demand far exceeded the supply.

Hides and blood were most commonly offered to the public, as they were plentiful in comparison to other wanted body parts. Dragon meat; like the purple slab Hagrid had bathed his face in last year; was the most plentiful dragon product, because not many had a taste for it, and for each dragon dead, there was literally thousands and thousands of kilos of meat to be harvested. Sure certain body parts such as the tail were more valued than others, and even certain breeds fetched better prices per ounce, but dragon steaks were still considered no big deal.

Dragon hearts though, being the central core of a dragon's innate magic and so valuable, was only approved by the International Conference of Wizards to be used as core material for the making of wands. Even then, a single medium sized dragon heart had over a thousand separate heart strings, each which was made into a separate wand. Harry had no idea of the size of heart in front of him (it was the size of a large watermelon, and almost completely filled the gas tank), but he knew it didn't matter. If the Ministry or possibly even Dumbledore found about his possession of a whole dragon heart, he'd be seeing the inside of Azkaban just as quick as his captured Death Eaters would.

"It's from a young Ukrainian Ironbelly I'm told," Sirius explained, as if he hadn't a care in the world. Since he was dead and couldn't stand trial for his crime, Harry supposed he didn't.

"I don't know where on earth Dung managed to find one, but when I asked him to keep his ears open for a magical source powerful enough to power my bike, he told me about this here right away. Cost a good small fortune I can tell you, but it was worth every galleon! The probes and wires protruding from the heart are taping into the magical core, and when you start the bike up, the heart actually beats! I had a hell of a time converting magical energy into combustion to power the motor, but after that, the rest was smooth sailing. If this project wasn't so illegal, I might have even tried for a patent with the Ministry. The large probes all power the engine, and each wire powers a certain charmed part of the bike. This way Harry, no matter how many times you raise the shield or cast a stunner, you'll always be able to again. I suspect this bike could go on for centuries before it ran out of juice."

"But why so many wires Sirius, if there are only five switches," James asked.

"Well," Sirius answered, "there's loads more to this bike than just the five switches on the dash. I've charmed the saddle bags to be magically expanded, and they're password protected as well. Password right now is 'I hate my mother,' but I'm sure you can change it Harry."

"Yes," Lily insisted, "please do."

"Anyway," Sirius went on, "the saddle bags are expanded about ten times each, so each is about the size of a normal car's boot. I've also charmed the bike to never tip over, so you don't have to worry about dumping the bike or wearing a helmet. Then the pipes are charmed not to get hot enough to burn you, and there's a permanent dirt and moisture repelling charm, so the bike will always stay clean, and can never be rained on. The largest thing I had to do was shield the gas tank from magical detection, so the Ministry can't detect the high levels of output. As long as you've got the tank closed, or open in a warded room, you'll be safe Harry. A few more modifications like a wizard's wireless in the dash, and automatic heating and cooling charms for when the weather calls for it, and I think I've nicely rounded out the bike! It can always have more features added on later, but to do that you'll have to crack open the gas tank and fiddle with the dragon heart leads, and that can be dangerous. Harry, you must never touch a dragon heart without wearing dragon hide gloves, and even then don't unless you know what you're doing."

Harry promised, and closed the tank now that the shock of seeing the heart inside was over with. Sirius told him a few more tips about the bike, but otherwise confirmed that as it was charmed never to fall over, Harry could take it for a spin as soon as he wanted. Lily had argued that Harry should get his license first, but without proper muggle identification or birth records (what had the Dursleys done with those?), she was overruled by the three testosterone-driven boys. Yes boys, because with the way they were acting, it was hard to call them men.

Sometime during Sirius's explanation of the bike, all the tools and chests in the small room had been cleaned and put in their proper place. Yet again, Harry was impressed by the elves' ability, as not only had he not noticed the work, but they didn't even know what the tools and gadgets were used for. Sirius told Harry that the bike was done and he wouldn't have any need of the tools anymore, but Harry felt that such a large collection shouldn't go to waste, and called for Dobby to transfer them to an empty room in his Hideaway. Harry already had the start of an idea in his head, and hoped it was possible.

Leaving the bike for now, Harry carried his parent's portrait back into the library, where with Sirius's personal knowledge, and his parent's expertise, Harry was able to further narrow down the two piles of objects Dobby had set aside. Not half of the things deemed "dark" by the house-elf were really dangerous, and that made Harry feel better about the large selection he still had to look over from Sirius's vault. Likewise, most of the items in the safer pile proved to be useless or toys left over from Sirius's childhood, with no real value. Again, Harry was able to drastically decrease the amount of stuff.

When he was all done, Shelly had by then found him, and said her goodbyes (with contract in hand), after graciously taking a portkey Harry offered her back to their meeting spot. Her car was parked nearby, and if Harry wasn't going to walk her back himself, the least he figured he could do was get her there another way. If Shelly was surprised or impressed by his knowledge and ability to create a portkey, she didn't say a word. Admittedly, it was only the second she had ever taken.

And so Harry left, leaving a manageable amount of items for Dobby and Winky to transport back to his Hideaway. Besides the two small piles, the many books, and his parents' portrait, Harry also reluctantly added Phineas Nigellus to the pile, and a few rare and valuable cauldrons and potion ingredients the elves had unearthed somewhere in the basement. There was not much else to consider, and by casting his second portkey spell of the day (this time on his new Indian Chief motorcycle), Harry found himself in the same back alley where he had earlier apparated to.

Padfoot may no longer be able to, but it was time for Harry to ride! The remaining days until Harry and Neville had to return to school passed by with a relaxed normalcy that Harry appreciated after the hectic holidays. His plan to turn one of his empty rooms into a mini-garage had worked out fine, and not only did Harry have room for all of Sirius's tools and a spacious workbench, but the Indian fit in just fine as well.

Driving the first day had been a challenge (as Harry had never driven even a go-cart before), but after a few minor difficulties, he got the hang of it. It was easier Harry supposed with the knowledge that he couldn't crash or fall, and that while practicing in the air, there were no other cars around to contend with.

Mostly flying the distance between Grimmauld Place and downtown London, Harry was worried that not even he would be able to access his Hideaway from outside the building. After all, he hadn't considered it when constructing his runes, but if Hedwig and the owls managed, Harry hoped he could too.

At first he was disappointed, as Harry counted that the building was one floor too short. But then as he concentrated, just like the elevator buttons, the building grew in height right in front of him, as if giving birth to a whole extra floor. After that, it was a simple matter of banishing a window and expanding the hole in the wall to fly his bike inside, and seal the building up after him. And since Harry had engaged the invisibility switch the second he had left the ground four miles back, he didn't have to worry about nosy muggles spotting him from the street below.

He did need more practice driving though, and in the mornings after his newly renewed workout circuit, Harry made sure to take his bike out to a deserted parking lot where he couldn't hurt anyone. Of course he enjoyed the flying equally as well, even though it was nowhere near as fast or as intimate as flying on a broomstick. Flying on his bike though; feeling the raw horsepower between his legs and vibration through his arms; was more satisfying in a relaxing and powerful way.

Remus took the bike out for a spin once as he was an accomplished rider (helping Sirius build his first bike), but hadn't taken it out since. Apparently Dumbledore had a new assignment for him, and most of Remus's time was spent at the school or in the field. After his meeting with Dumbledore, Remus only spent the night twice at Harry's Hideaway. He was shocked to learn Sirius had been building a new bike (apparently only Mundungus Fletcher knew), but after he thought about it, wasn't that surprised.

Neville didn't have the courage to drive the bike alone (Harry may have been a newcomer, but at least he knew what a motorcycle was), but he did consent to ridding pillion with Harry on occasion. Dobby and Winky came along too once, and all four of them had a grand time as Harry flew them above the city. Neville managed to fit on the seat behind Harry as he held on tightly, and the enlarged saddlebags acted like sidecars for the two small house-elves. It was a funny sight really; seeing Harry approach on his shiny motorbike with Neville peeking over his shoulder, and two house-elves excitedly screaming on either side with their bat-like ears flapping in the breeze; but he didn't care. He was spending time with his friends, and enjoying the last of his vacation.

Speaking of spending time, Harry managed to sit and talk with his parents and Sirius at least two hours in the evening since he'd discovered them. Aileen Lindsay and Sirius's Uncle; the two portraits he'd taken from Sirius's vault; he also spent some time with, but not nearly as much. Like Phineas Nigellus, Sirius's uncle, although more pleasant, was a private man, and contempt to just observe an empty room for hours on end. After being locked up in a vault for so long, Harry couldn't blame him. The most he talked was when Harry pushed his portrait up against the one with Sirius, and the two were able to talk. Apparently, Sirius didn't know a portrait of his favorite uncle existed, and cherished the chance to speak civilly with a relative again. That was one thing Harry was confused about, and that was why weren't the portraits able to visit with each other; like the ones at Hogwarts did. He was informed that a spell needed to be performed in order for that to happen, and Harry unfortunately didn't know it off hand. He promised to look it up though once he returned to Hogwarts (none of his books had anything about magical paintings).

Aileen Lindsay was feeling more at ease in the magical world, but still had no idea how she'd come to be created, or what ties she had to the Black vault her portrait had been found in. Lily took it upon herself to spend the most time with the confused muggle, as she was the only other female around besides Winky, and Lily often complained about sharing a portrait with both James and Sirius.

As for Phineas Nigellus, well, after Harry greeted him and received a nasty reply, Harry took great pleasure in wrapping him in a spare sheet, and storing him in one of the unused bathrooms. Harry didn't know what he was going to do with the linked portrait yet, and he wanted to make sure Dumbledore wasn't trying to spy.

Training with Neville also continued, and after their successful defense at St. Mungo's, Neville's confidence and ability to fight stepped up yet another notch. He still spent a lot of time with his parents in their separate suite, but he and Harry managed to duel at least three hours every afternoon; sometimes more. Dobby and Winky had also taken it upon themselves to permanently furnish the small flat the Longbottoms occupied in the same style of Harry's house, as it looked like they would be staying awhile.

After nearly four straight hours of floo calling while Harry was at Grimmauld Place meeting with Dumbledore, Neville finally managed to contact his grandmother and explained to her the situation. Shocked that her incapable son and daughter-in-law had been attacked, and even more shocked that her grandson had aided Harry Potter in their rescue, she had no problems letting her relatives remain safely where they were. As long as they were properly cared for, and she could move them in the future if she desired, she didn't mind in the least. Her business in Australia was far from complete, and it was just impossible for her to get away and arrange alternate plans herself. She did insist that Healer Bosworth be able to make a house call sometime around Easter to check up on Frank and Alice though, and after Neville agreed (he knew Harry wouldn't mind), his gran promised to mail an owl to St. Mungo's officially approving Neville's earlier decision.

The only slightly unpleasant thing Harry had to do was get his aunt to sign her consent form for Harry to sell Grimmauld Place. Luckily, Hedwig volunteered to be the bearer of bad news, and Harry thanked her profusely that he didn't have to make the trip himself. After so much worry, if didn't even turn out to be that bad. Harry sent Hedwig during the day when he knew Vernon would be at work, and the only thing he had written was, "Sign this form, or else I'll have to come back and live with you all next year." Not three minutes after she had left, Hedwig returned with Petunia's scratchy signature, and not another word.

That was pretty much how the rest of Harry and Neville's holiday went. Hermione sent Rowan twice with letters and thanks from her parents, and Raul even visited once with a short note from Ginny, saying it was his first mail delivery. She's been so taken with him, she wrote, that she refused to use him as a post bird, and instead spoiled him rotten. Already she claimed he had learned two new sayings, and Harry got to hear one for himself the night Raul had appeared.

"Squawk. Ron, stop being a prat! Squawk. Que es pendejo?"

It was the morning of January the third when Harry and Neville did a last minute check around the house, making sure they hadn't forgotten to pack anything. Dobby and Winky would be joining them at Hogwarts later, and everything else they needed was packed the night before in their individual shrunken trunks. Hedwig offered them a ride to the station this time so they didn't have to use a portkey, and offered her tail feathers to both boys from her perch on Harry's shoulder.

"All set Nev? Got everything you need."

"Yep," Neville answered. He looked sad to be leaving his parents' company, but Harry promised he'd try to smuggle Neville off school grounds occasionally so he could visit.

"I really had a fun time here Harry. I really appreciate all you've done for me lately."

"Don't sweat it Neville," Harry grinned back. "You underestimate yourself. I had loads of fun too. Without you here, I don't know what I would have done."

"Thanks Harry," the one-time chubby boy smiled.

"Alright girl, we're all set. Please take us to the train platform."

Hedwig whistled and complied, and in a billowing twirl of flames, Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom vanished.

When they arrived, both boys dropped their grips on the phoenix's tail, and stared each other in the eyes. Something had just transferred between the two of them; and neither knew nor cared what it was. With no further hesitation or embarrassment, they seized each other in a passionate embrace and kissed! It was bliss.

Author Note:

Well, here's my next chapter as promised, and in less than two weeks as well. Whoa! That's the fastest update I've had in a long time. I hope it was well worth your wait, and let's see....I've got a few things to talk about.

Portrait. Yeah, we all know it's been done a thousand times before, but I figured why wouldn't Harry have one done. I mean with so many fat ladies and Sir Cadegons riding around Hogwarts, why not a Lily and James Potter, and a little Sirius Black thrown in? Frankly I had the portrait idea right from day one, but almost removed it because it was becoming so overused. In the time since I outlined this fic, I've seen at least 20 authors use the idea. And more importantly, one even did it the same way I was going to. I'm sure you've all heard of Full Pensieve's "Years of Rebellion," and I was shocked not to see a magical portrait in his fic (he's a great writer, and I'm honored to share even the smallest detail with him), but he gave the same explanation as well. You know, the whole mixing paints with a penseive's contents. So I praise him for putting an explanation behind a canon reference no one before has cared to explore; even if it did make my own theory less revolutionary. They're not the same; slightly different; and I won't ignore the fact. The idea was only outlined

originally, but in fine tuning it, I couldn't help but think of Mike's portrayal.

Dumbledore. Hopefully now you've all seen I'm not going to turn him and Harry against each other, as their conflict is finally over. DD just needed to see Harry in a new light. Not as a child and student, who's careless and reckless when concerned over the actions of others; but instead as an individual with the right to decide his own future, and who has matured greatly in the past year, and has more than taken the necessary measures to protect himself, while still not waiving on his need to protect and defend his friends. From this point in my fic on, the two will be working much closer to each other, although you need not fear, for Harry will still be keeping most of his secrets.

Snape. Yeah, wasn't that fun! What can I say? I truly like to beat on his character, and although I know I'm probably most uncanon-like with his scenes, I do have a reason for Harry standing up to him so strongly. We'll see more of Snape shortly, including a trip to Ollivander's where he has to buy a replacement wand. (How cool was that – Harry snapping his wand right in his face?)

Mrs. Black's Portrait. Well, like Harry said, what else were you going to do with her? If Grimmauld Place were to be sold, who in there right mind would want that painting? Not even the Malfoys I'm sure. And how many of us didn't have the desire to snap the damn thing over our knee at least once? So, I figured, why not have Harry do just that. In fanon I've seen him burn it, blast the wall apart, and I've even seen some secrets vaults and rooms hidden behind her painting. Simply snapping her in half isn't to original I admit, but I was going for realism. And I know if I were in Harry's position, I would do exactly as I wrote he did. Call me cruel and heartless, but whatever.

Kreacher. Same as Mrs. Black really. He was a pain I needed to get rid of, and as characters Harry and the Order needed to get rid of him or keep him under control as well. So I had Dobby administer a little house-elf justice, and I don't see why that might not be true in some way. Remember back to when Harry first told Dobby and Winky about Kreacher, and they were appalled. Yeah, I was dropping major hints even back then. A reader asked me some time ago if I'd explore more of Dobby and Winky's relationship, and I told him I wasn't planning on

it, because I had no idea where to begin. Creating a whole house-elf culture is a daunting task; worthy of an entire fic itself. When writing this scene though I couldn't help but think that it was the perfect opportunity to introduce a little house-elf history. I wonder how else did they originally enter slavery? Promising their unborn children for wronging a witch or wizard seemed at the time just as good an idea as any other I've read.

Motorcycle. Again like the portrait, yes it's overused, but I did put some spins on it to make it original. First off, I think I'm the only person so far to have Sirius create a new bike, not the one he lent to Hagrid 15 years ago. I mean, damn! That thing must be rusted through by now, if it even managed to survive Hagrid's weight. With Sirius thought to be guilty, I didn't think Hagrid or anyone else would bother maintaining of keeping the bike (which looked dirty and broken down in the SS movie anyway), so I thought it would be cool to write it as gone feral in the forest. If it happened to the Anglia, why not a motorcycle? Plus, there's the fact that Sirius was trapped inside Grimmauld Place for almost an entire year. So, what the hell did he do with himself? No internet and television, and I would have gone stir crazy within weeks. So I thought building a new bike would be a believable hobby. I also left hints like mad in the past months about the bike, and there have even been two pics in my Yahoo! Group of it since this summer. I'm really surprised no one asked about them before. The bike will remain largely a new toy for Harry though until me first sequel. I have many plans for it then. And for anyone's info, yes, the story about Indians is true, although I tweaked the timeline to fit HP's world a little. In reality, Indians didn't start production up again until 1997. So I think I'm a year off. Sue me! And yes, they're my fav bikes.

Anything else I can remember to say I'll post in my Yahoo! Group, and I'll also be having a live chat there soon. I've also got a new fic "The Best of a Bad Situation" which is being published at It's a short, smutty NC-17 piece I couldn't get out of my head, and I hope a few of you will take a look. I guess it's my way to keep PoT PG13; by writing pure smut somewhere else. That's all for now though, and I promise to make one more update before the month ends!

Oh, and as I've taken to do lately, all review responses to my last chapter are posted in the "files" section of my Yahoo! Group. I think likes it that way, and so do most of my members. Joining is free and easy, so stop by and take a look. Link is on my bio page; just click on "homepage" to get there. Later!

Ross

P.S. Oh yeah, forget that last paragraph completely! I was just having a joke after so many of you complained about last chapter's cliffhanger. I don't write slash, and nothing will happen between Harry and Neville. I promise! But how many of you were scared? Or stranger yet, how many of you were excited? Leave a review and tell me.

## Chapter 27 – Interactions

Unlike when he'd boarded the train right away back in September, once Harry arrived on platform nine and three quarters with Neville thanks to Hedwig's phoenix abilities, he immediately looked around for familiar faces; eager to find his friends. The red sea of Weasleys weren't in view yet (no doubt running late), but Harry easily spotted Hermione and her parents, and he and Neville headed over to say hi.

Along the way Harry was greeted by some other friendly faces; mostly members of the D.A. and fellow Gryffindors; and they thanked him for their Christmas gifts. Harry had purchased a proper wand holster for each of the members, and although it had cost him a shiny sickle for the almost one hundred members, Harry thought the cost was well worth it. Even though they were only made of leather (not dragon hide like his own), the wand holsters would prove invaluable if any of the D.A. were to get in a spot of trouble.

"Hi Harry, Neville," Hermione greeted each of them with a hug and small kiss on the cheek. "Did you enjoy the rest of your vacation?"

"It was great," Harry answered. "I'll tell you more on the train when we're all together."

"Harry got a motorcycle," Neville blurted out, not able to contain himself.

"A motorcycle, eh?" Mr. Granger asked. "Aren't you a little young to be driving? What type of motorbike did you get?"

Harry was pleased at Mr. Granger's apparent interest. "It's an Indian Chief, and the only reason why I can drive it is because it's magical, so it's much safer than a real bike. Besides, it's not like any wizards even have things like licenses or permits. Hermione could, I suppose, because there's record of her in the muggle world, but the rest of us don't have proper ID or anything. I still don't know how the Dursleys got me into school and stuff. Must have forged some documents or something."

Hermione and her mother said something that sounded intelligent about birth records and school vaccination reports, but all Harry heard was Mr. Granger say, "An Indian Chief! Tell me all about it!" Obviously, he was a fan, and for the next ten minutes Harry, Neville, and Hermione's father were in their own world talking shop about horsepower, torque, and air intake valves. Hermione just shook her head, but listened in after awhile as even she was a little curious about Harry's new toy. It wasn't until Ginny made her way over casually, with Raul's cage in her hands, that the others even notice the Weasleys had arrived, and stopped talking about the motorbike.

"Aww, I wanted to hear more about revolutions per minute. Sounds fascinating," Luna said. Harry didn't even see her join their discussion, although it sounded like she heard a great deal of it.

"Luna, I didn't see you there. How was your holiday?" He asked. Of his closest friends, Luna was the only one who hadn't visited over the vacation. Harry had offered, but was informed that ever since her mother died, she and her father spent Christmas time together alone; just the two of them. This year, Luna said they'd visit Sicily, where an underwater tribe of merfolk gave tours of a sunken ancient city to tourists. Hermione said that was absolute rubbish when she heard about it, but at least she had the decency to wait until Luna left the room before she had said so.

"It was very nice, Harry," Luna said, "although the merfolk we visited refused to admit they were giving tours of Atlantis. Said instead that it was just some city that got flooded when Mt. Etna erupted. Dad and I got some good pictures though, and I can't wait to develop them. Thank you for your gifts by the way. The vault and holster were very thoughtful, but my Dad absolutely adores the butterbeer jewelry you made."

"You're welcome," Harry said with a blush, under the scrutinizing gaze of both Ginny and Hermione. With all the butterbeer he and his double had been drinking, Harry started to save the bottle caps around Halloween, and crafted them into earrings, a bracelet, and a hair barrette. Harry knew that Luna always wore her original butterbeer necklace, and thought the others would go nicely together in the same theme. He didn't think it would be inappropriate either.

After all, it wasn't like it was real jewelry!

"Thank you for your gift as well," he said. Luna had gotten him a lion hat that matched her own, that she suggested he should wear when he played Quidditch. Harry wasn't sure it was such a good idea to wear while flying through the air, but supposed it was the thought that counted.

The group traded some more small talk for another few minutes, politely saying goodbye to the adults, when Harry noticed they were missing someone.

"Ginny, where's Ron off at? I haven't seen him around yet."

Ginny turned when Harry called her name, but looked a little green once she understood his question.

"He's a...he's gone to get a compartment on the train," she said, with not a little discomfort. "He didn't get much sleep last night, and we woke up early today, so I suppose he's tired."

Hermione raised her eyebrow suspiciously at Ginny's odd behavior, but said nothing. Harry noticed it too, and wanted nothing more than to get on the train, and get on underway. After Ron's own odd behavior when they'd last seen each other on Boxing Day, Harry wanted to make sure his friend was alright, and that the jealousy he'd felt when they were all trading gifts had died down like it normally did. If anyone besides himself could hold a grudge, it was Ron, and Harry wanted to make sure things were alright with his best mate.

After that, the group made their way aboard (Harry only suffered from one Weasley hug this time), but didn't find Ron in their normal compartment. Neville and Hermione entered though, and Ginny followed, leaving Harry in the corridor outside. If Ron was already onboard, wouldn't he already have saved some seats, and shouldn't they try to find him?

"Harry," Ginny said, coming back out in the corridor. "Why don't you settle down, and I'll go fetch Ron. Dunderhead probably went to find

the snack lady early or something. Watch out for Raul will you, and I'll be right back? He doesn't like to be in his cage."

Harry again noticed Ginny was acting strangely, but agreed and stepped inside. Hermione and Neville sat on one side talking about all the defense work he'd done with Harry over the holidays, so Harry took a seat on the other side next to the window, which he looked out. Most parents had already left the platform, but there were a few still milling about that were waving last goodbyes to their children. None of them were familiar to Harry except a long-haired blonde man, who stood out in the crowd like he didn't belong. 'He doesn't belong,' Harry realized. Lucius Malfoy had no right to mingle with normal, law abiding citizens.

As if he knew he was being thought about, Malfoy turned his head from the front of the train right to Harry's window, and sneered at what he saw. Unlike their last meeting at the Quidditch game; when so many spectators made it impossible for him to be anything but semi-polite; now Malfoy had no qualms about mouthing a death threat to Harry.

"I'll be seeing you real soon, Potter," Harry vaguely made out.

It was supposed to be a threat, he knew, but somehow Harry wasn't intimidated. On the contrary, he reveled in the knowledge that it was true. 'Sooner than you think,' Harry added in his own thoughts. Now that his holidays were over with, his Death Eater hunting would be starting again, and Malfoy was at the top of Harry's list.

The two could have gone on staring at each other until the train pulled out of the station, but thankfully Ginny entered the compartment at that moment, and captured Harry's attention.

"Ron's sitting with Dean and Seamus this time," she said, as if nothing was wrong. "He said he'll see us all at dinner tonight."

"He could have at least said hello," Hermione muttered. Although Ron did sometimes get on her nerves, it was only polite to greet your best friends after being apart for so long. Hermione wasn't the only one who thought so either.

"What compartment is he in, Gin," Harry asked. "I think I'll go stop by to say hi."

"Why don't you just wait until dinner, Harry?" Ginny said nervously. She was hiding something, and it was apparent to everyone in the compartment.

"I've got time now," he said. "Besides, I can say hi to Dean and Seamus too."

"Ahhh," Ginny yelled frustrated. She flopped down in the seat next to Harry, and studied her hands intensely while she gathered her courage. Then she turned to look right at Harry, and blurted out. "He doesn't want to see you!"

It took a second for Harry to comprehend, but even then, he didn't. "What?"

"He doesn't want to see you, Harry," she repeated, this time with more compassion. "Look, he's just being silly. Ever since we were over to visit, he got jealous that you were giving out such great gifts, and you know how he gets. He just needed some time to cool down, but Mum and Dad made the mistake of thinking that they should tell him the truth just then, and told Ron about the money you gave us back in July. Well, they should have let Ron calm down some before they did that, because he got even angrier. Started to go on about how all the new textbooks and robes me and him had this year were thanks to you, and he didn't even know it. Then Dad let slip that me, Fred, and George already did know because we went with Mum to Gringotts when he was grounded, and that made him even angrier. Now he thinks there's some sort of conspiracy against him or something, and he's being stupid. I just went and begged him to at least come by and say hi, but he's refusing. Just give it until dinner please, Harry, and I'm sure Ron will calm down by then. You know how he gets when there's food on the table. All you have to do is offer him the last chicken drumstick, and he'll be fine. Please!"

Whoa! Harry didn't know what to think, except that he should rush right up to his "best mate" and beat some sense into him. Didn't Ron

know by now that Harry didn't care about his money, or anything else Ron normally got hung up about?

"It's not just that," Ginny answered when Harry asked about it. "There's more I'm afraid. He's also feeling jealous about Neville, because you two have gotten a lot closer lately. And then me and you spend so much time together because of Quidditch, and you and Hermione spend time together when you tutor me and Luna, that I think he's just feeling left out."

"What did I do?" Neville wanted to know.

"Shush Neville, you didn't do anything," Hermione told him. "Ron's just feeling insecure."

"That's not even the worst of it," Ginny went on.

"You mean there's more," Harry couldn't believe it.

She just nodded. "When we got back from your place that night Harry, Mum and Dad found Percy asleep in his old room, crying into his pillow. Apparently he felt bad that Mum sent him a jumper for Christmas, and he didn't get them anything in return. And of course that just made him feel worse for returning the one he got sent last year. He really has been trying to apologize for being such a prat, according to Bill, Charlie, and Dad, and he decided to stop by to finally apologize to the whole family. Well, when he saw that none of us were home; even after he waited hours for us; I guess he just finally broke down. Thought we all went on vacation without him or something. When he woke up, and saw Mum, they both just started to cry. Ever since then Percy's been living back at home, and Ron's the only one who still thinks he should suffer for how he treated us last year. Mum and Dad have already forgiven him, as have Bill and Charlie I think. Me and the twins made him agree to be a guinea pig for some new Wheezes, but after that we were fine with him being around too. Ron's the only one holding a grudge for some reason, and I think it's on your behalf, even though he's angry with you too. It doesn't make any sense, and now Ron won't listen to any of us. It's not just you he's avoiding; he practically locked himself in his room this entire past week."

"Well, I should go and talk to him then, right; to make sure he doesn't get any worse?" Harry questioned.

"No," Hermione informed him with what she thought was the obvious answer. "Harry, you should know by now that if you try to tell Ron he's being silly, it will only make things worse. Just let him calm down, and I'll talk to him at dinner. Maybe then he'll see reason and stop being such a git."

"So I'm just supposed to do nothing and pretend like everything is ok?" Harry didn't know if he could do that. He was a man of action; especially in the last year; and asking Harry Potter to do nothing was like asking Draco Malfoy to catch a snitch in a Quidditch match.

"I think Hermione's right, Harry," Neville said. "Ron's always in a better mood when he's eating, so I'd wait until later. I'd go and talk to him myself, but if what Ginny says is true, I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, "that wouldn't be a great idea Neville. Ron's feeling threatened I think, and I don't know if he'd take kindly to you telling him to lighten up."

Harry couldn't believe that Ron would actually think he should be threatened by Neville, and said as much. 'Neville is just another friend,' he thought, 'and Ron can't possibly think I'm trying to replace him as my best mate.' The girls however explained how silly and stupid boys were when it came to emotions and feelings, and eventually convinced Harry not to go after Ron. Dinner was only a few short hours away, and after such a long break, ultimately he decided he could wait that much longer.

The rest of the train ride passed uneventfully after that, although Harry found it difficult to concentrate on much other than Ron. Hermione used that to her advantage too, when they played a chess game with Harry's muggle chess set. Neville caught up on some homework reading while they played, and Ginny tried to watch, but soon dozed off leaning against Harry's shoulder. When that happened, Raul said something funny from the luggage rack that

made Harry blush, and after Hermione and Neville had a good laugh at his expense, they each returned to their previous activities.

When the chess game ended (with Harry's distracted mind, it didn't take long for Hermione to decimate him), the three of them awake talked some about the upcoming D.A. meetings, and Harry explained which spells he was thinking of teaching. Some of the D.A. stopped in to say hi as well, but didn't stay long because they noticed Ginny sleeping. Luna stopped in for a longer time, and actually woke Ginny up about an hour away from Hogwarts with some unpleasant news.

"You're drooling on Harry, Ginny," Luna informed her as if it were the most natural news for the sleepy girl to hear. "My father says consecrating another with bodily fluids is good luck and powerful magic in some cultures, but I don't think drool is what he was talking about."

That time, Harry got to join in Hermione and Neville's laughing, although when Ginny turned beat red and started to hit them all, Harry made everyone stop. His shoulder couldn't take much more abuse.

The only surprising thing about the entire train ride (other than Ron's absence), at least as far as Harry was concerned, was that Draco Malfoy hadn't made one attempt to enter, or even find their compartment. Either he was learning not to upset Harry, or he was up to something devious. Harry didn't know which, and didn't much care. If Draco was up to something funny, Harry would find out soon enough.

At long last the Hogwart's Express pulled into Hogsmeade Station, and the train ride was over. School carriages pulled by dark winged horses were once more in sight, and because Ron and Luna were both off with other friends, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville all caught a ride in the same carriage. It was the first time Ron had ever ridden apart from Harry, a fact which quieted him the entire journey, despite the cheerful attempts of the girls to engage him in conversation.

Compared to September's feast, the dinner that night wasn't nearly as lavish, but still it was more than the normal fare the students got during school weekends. Roast chicken, pork tenderloin, huge casseroles; all the favorites were on the tables. That, plus the fact that the snack lady on the train had run out of sweets halfway down the train's length, ensured that every student was eating all they could get their hands on.

Harry wasn't much hungry though. Ron was sitting away from his normal spot with Dean and Seamus, and although he was the only one whose appetite suffered from it, Harry wasn't the only one to notice. Almost every Gryffindor gave speculative looks out the corners of their eyes at Harry and Ron, and even some of the other tables shared inquisitive whispers. At the staff table, Professor Dumbledore looked concerned, Professor McGonagall looked upset, and Snape for the first time in Harry's memory looked almost gleeful.

Humorously enough, the only person not reacting in any way to their separation was Ron himself. He chose not to even make eye contact with Harry or any of their other close friends, and instead merrily ate his fill as Dean explained the intricacies of muggle football. He'd said it all before of course, but never before had Ron paid much attention. The fact that he was forcing himself to listen, just to please his new mate, hurt Harry all the more.

Dinner came and went. So did pudding and dessert. It was only when all the plates and dishes cleared themselves did Harry perk up to listen to any important announcements. Most were just repeats of school warnings and a summary of house point standings, although Harry was tickled to hear that two more of Fred and George's products were added to Filch's list of contraband items. Harry laughed aloud like many of the other Gryffindors, and turned his head to share a smile with Ron, only to find Ron not there. As the announcements continued on, Harry found himself just wanting to get back to the dorm rooms.

"And lastly," Dumbledore intoned, with much cheer and mischief in his voice, "I find that I must apologize to the school's population; especially the females; for my oversight of an announcement this past term. It seems that two school years ago during the Triwizard

Tournament, when we hosted visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, many of our own young ladies became enamored with the Yule Ball, and expected something of its sort to become a yearly activity. It has never been a school function before though, and last year no such dance was announced. Imagine my surprise when over this past summer I found myself bombarded with owls left and right requesting that I rectify that situation this upcoming year, and that the Heads of House also agreed it would be a good idea; to set aside house rivalries for a night if you will.”

As the Headmaster continued on, two unique and separate whispers rushed through the crowd. All the girls were giggling and already planning outfits to wear, while the boys couldn’t believe their dismay, and were complaining that no dance was mentioned in their school letters. For a dance is surely what Dumbledore was getting too; everyone knew that. It was just his dottiness and penchant for long-winded speeches that made him continue as if he were telling the school a huge secret.

“So with their encouragement,” he continued, “I planned for a Yule Ball and even booked The Weird Sisters to once again delight us with their enchanting melodies. It is to my embarrassment, and with apologies, that I forgot to include that information in your school letters. The lack of dress robes on many of your parts, as well as me forgetting the engagement until some of our more vocal females accosted me as the end of year approached, made the dance an impossibility. Therefore there will be no Yule Ball this year, and for that I am sorry.”

“Yes!” A Ravenclaw boy shouted, pumping his fist. Many other boys laughed at that, and most all were as equally relieved as Harry that they hadn’t been subjected to another school formal. Especially with the strange way Cho had been acting in December, the thought of having to ask her or another female to a dance made him shudder in fear. The first time had been horrifying enough, and even to this day, although it was somewhat of a joke in Gryffindor tower how Harry had completely ignored his date Parvati, the two of them still skirted the issue.

"Not so fast, Mr. Gunther," Dumbledore replied, smiling. This caused all the girls who had been moaning and complaining to look up on tenterhooks, hoping there was a catch.

"To rectify my mistake, I've decided that this year Hogwarts will host its first ever annual Valentine's Day Dance, the Saturday night after the holiday."

This time the girls cheered, as Mr. Gunther of Ravenclaw, all his friends, and in fact every boy in school without a girlfriend all complained and sat down in shock.

"The dance will be open to third years and up, and first and second years will have separate activities planned that night as a special treat." Nobody heard him, because the girls (even Hermione, Harry was surprised to see) were still cheering and giggling uncontrollably.

This time Dumbledore waited for the crowd to die down before he continued. "The first Hogsmeade weekend has been scheduled the first weekend in February to accommodate anyone needing appropriate attire, and Gladraggs in town has been warned to expect increased business. Letters will also be sent to your parents, to inform them of the dance in case you don't have enough current funds for dress robes. Although The Weird Sisters are otherwise engaged, I have arranged for another popular band to play for the evening, although you must forgive me for wanting to keep that surprise to myself for the time being. That is all for now, and I encourage all of you to not wait to find a dance partner, as the dance will fast approach sooner than you think. Enjoy the rest of your evening, and you all are dismissed to your common rooms."

Angrily, all the boys got up from the benches; only a few looking pleased or even content. Even the first and second year boys, who weren't allowed attendance to the dance and therefore didn't have to worry about finding a date, looked upset on their sex's behalf. Conversely, all the girls were excited and talking madly. Make-up parties were being formed, beauty spells were being traded, and school gossips like Parvati and Pansy were already taking polls of which boys would ask which girls as their dates. It wasn't until Harry got to the huge double door (he had pushed ahead and was one of

the first), that Dumbledore called out to them all with a small addendum.

“Silly me,” he chuckled, but his voice was still loud enough to call everyone’s attention back to the front of the room. “I almost forgot the most important part. In honor of Sadie Hawkins; a wizard who was the unfortunate victim of a gender bending spell and preferred to live the rest of his life in the muggle world; and the muggle tradition he began, this dance will be girl’s choice. For those of you not familiar with muggle culture, that means that the girls must ask the boys out for the night, and that the traditional roles are reversed. That is all, and have a pleasant night.”

Boys and girls were equally quiet; most confused at the news. Harry, Hermione, and a few others knew what it meant, and soon word spread throughout the school just what a Sadie Hawkins dance was. Then they all erupted. This time, the girls were complaining things were unfair, while the boys all had a good laugh. The next two months would be very interesting.

Harry wasn’t sure how long it had taken him or the rest of the male Gryffindors to get back to their common room, but all he was sure of was that it was a dead race to get away from all the screaming, complaining females. The purebloods were complaining that such barbaric muggles traditions were beneath them and not fitting for their societal stature, while the muggleborn and mixed blood girls were just in general distress. To an outsider who hadn’t heard Dumbledore’s announcement, one would assume that Voldemort himself had stormed the castle by all the commotion that was caused, but to a bunch of teenage girls, that might very well have been preferable.

“So girls really have to ask us to the dance?” Neville still couldn’t believe it. As Harry had learned, Neville grew up very sheltered even for a wizard, and he’d probably never even heard of such a thing.

“I think it’s about high time myself,” Dean answered. All the sixth year boys were sitting by the fire, talking about the dance. Only the younger girls had returned from the Great Hall, and most of them had

retreated up to their dorms. As it was, the common room was currently a bit of a boys' club.

"Muggle culture has become much more progressive in the past few decades," Dean continued, "and girls ask blokes out on dates almost as much as guys do birds. Why shouldn't they? It's cool that Dumbledore at least tries to include some muggle culture. Outside of muggle studies class, you don't hardly ever see it. There's just as many of us with mixed backgrounds as there are purebloods after all."

Seamus nodded in agreement, and Neville was just looking more confused and worried than ever. Harry didn't know why. In was the other sixth year boy that Harry's attention was on though. Ron had been with Dean and Seamus during the whole walk back to the seventh floor, and the one time when Harry went to talk to him, Ron simply ignored his friend, increased his pace, and left Harry behind. Even now when all the dorm mates were sitting together in the same group of chairs, Ron was as far away from Harry as physically possible, and hadn't looked his way once.

Philip and Frank came over to talk to Neville at that point (the team's beaters got on very well together from all the time they spent in the weight room), and discussion turned to which girls would ask out which boys. The conversation was entirely too much like the gossiping the boys always accused Parvati and Lavender of for Harry's taste, but even he had to admit it was interesting to think about who would show up with who. That is, of course, until Dean pointed out the obvious.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to wait and see. Of course, Harry here's going to have his first pick of the litter, so I guess the rest of us are just sloppy seconds. Just promise not to take more than one girl to the dance, huh Harry, and leave us some of the fit ones."

"Wha?" It took Harry a moment to digest what Dean had said, but as all the rest of them (save one; guess who it was) snickered at the look on Harry face, he put it all together.

"Oh holly hell!" Ever since his condemnation of Fudge, the papers had been showing him in a good light again. Not only that, but he was back towards the top of Witch Weekly's most eligible bachelor list, and he was sure there were plenty of other periodicals that wrote scandalous articles as well. With all their circulation, Harry knew from the eyes he sometimes caught even from perfect strangers, the girls in the school could very well all have their sights set on him.

"Yeah," Seamus mocked, "real shame. If I was chased by nearly every single skirt in the school, and even some who aren't single, I'd be real scared too. What could possibly be worse?"

Some of the others snickered at Seamus's joke, but not two. Harry of course didn't, because all he ever wanted was to be treated normally, and his celebrity status, no matter what the benefits were, never let that happen.

And Ron didn't laugh either. Harry could almost curse Seamus for further inciting him. Ron's face became flustered, and Harry knew his friend was reaching a breaking point.

"Yeah," Ron finally yelled. "It must be so horrible to be famous, and popular, and rich, and talented; to be the first pick of every girl in school. Oh Harry, I feel for you!" Ron's sarcasm wasn't lost on the group.

"Come on Ron," Neville piped in, hoping to calm things down. "You know more than anybody how much Harry dislikes all that."

"I used to know more than anybody!" He retorted. "Now it looks like your better friends than I am! So sorry Ron, you're too emotional. Hey, but here's a load of galleons to take your mind off things. Go buy yourself something nice. Yeah, thanks Harry!"

"I never said anything like that!" Harry yelled back. "I gave everyone a vault of galleons; even Luna! Sirius' will told me to spread the wealth around, and that's what I was doing!"

"Did his will tell you to do that last summer, when Mum took Ginny and the twins to Gringotts?" Harry flinched as he realized what Ron

was getting at, and Ron caught the look with a smug smile. "Thought not. So don't use convenient excuses just when they suit you. You've become too good at lying and manipulating people this year Harry. It won't work on me though! I see you for what you really are!"

Dean stepped up to Ron (who was standing now) and put his hand on the agitated boy's shoulder, who only got slapped away for his trouble. Still, Dean persisted, and quietly let them all know, "Ron, Harry; the whole room is watching you."

"I don't care," Harry screamed. "Let them watch. Merlin knows they bloody well watch everything else I do with my life. Why should now be any different?"

"You really do like it all, don't you?" Ron said. "I always thought Snape was mental when he called you attention seeking, but I can see I might finally agree with him after all."

Without another word, Ron turned his back on Harry and left the room, climbing the stairs to his dorm.

The common room was shrouded in silence for the next moments, as everyone watched a range of emotions come over Harry's face. Anger, pity, remorse, frustration; and underlying them all, sadness. He could not for the life of him figure out how Ron had become so difficult and jealous during the break. Hell, the two had hardly seen each other in all that time. And on the ride to London back in December, they had both been the best of friends. What had gone wrong?

"It was probably too early, Harry," Neville tried to comfort his friend. "Ron just needs to cool down, and apparently he needs more time than Ginny thought. Give it a week perhaps? When Quidditch practice starts up again, I'm sure Ron will come around."

Harry thought about the advice, and decided it was wrong. Ron wasn't the kind of person who blew his top and apologized; he was the kind of person who stewed, and only got angrier. And if Harry let things alone for a whole week, Ron and Harry might very well find themselves at the end of each others' wands. A situation Harry had

feared ever since his fourth year when Ron had gone on his first jealous tirade.

"I think you're wrong, Neville," Harry explained. "It's best I deal with this now, before it gets any worse. I should have approached him on the train even. He's probably more pissed that I didn't try to come find him earlier." Facing the staircase but speaking to his dorm mates, Harry asked them, "Give us awhile, would you?"

Neville, Dean, and Seamus all nodded their heads. None of them wanted to interrupt Harry and Ron, knowing how explosive things might get. Instead, Seamus whispered to Dean it might be a good idea to get Madame Pomfrey on standby.

With a deep breath, Harry walked up the stairs for what turned out to be one of the worst conversations of his life.

The next morning at breakfast, Harry sat with the Quidditch team as normal, except he sat on one side, and Ron the complete other. Ginny, the other chasers, Frank and Neville, and even Dennis Creevey sat between them, and by the look in their co-captain's eyes, they knew the new seating arrangements were permanent.

Class schedules were redistributed as one of the Professors had to change his meeting times, but Harry's few classes weren't affected, and he slipped the paper into his pocket without even looking at it.

All throughout the dining room people were staring at Harry, because word had leaked out earlier that morning of his and Ron's fall out. Apparently arguing with a room full of witnesses and spectators wasn't such a good idea, and word had spread fast. Lavender and Parvati might not have been present, but if there was one fault common among all Gryffindors; even the boys; it was that they often jumped to conclusion, and were hard pressed to keep a secret. So naturally, as Dumbledore would say, the whole school knew about Harry's fight with Ron, almost verbatim.

Even the teachers knew, and Snape once again had that satisfied snarky smile on his face, matched only by Draco's trademark smirk. Professor McGonagall looked like she wanted to drag the two fighting friends off to her office to beat some sense in them, but a warning

glance from Dumbledore reminded her to stay seated. It was a long running disagreement between them, but Dumbledore was of the lassie-fair philosophy that left personal problems alone. He felt that when friendships were strained, they either broke as was meant to be, or were forged even stronger in their turmoil. Only if school rules were broken, or class performance suffered, did he occasionally let his Heads of House take a more active role; but that too depended on who the students were.

Minerva McGonagall on the other hand felt differently about her students. With no other adult presence around (parents could hardly offer advice in their letters, assuming they were even informed by their children in the first place), she felt she had a duty to smooth out petty grievances that sometimes got out of hand. Especially when the fighting students were Harry Potter and Ron Weasley; two of her more prominent students, and who were both very important to the Order of the Phoenix; she wanted to first off know what they were fighting about, and then wanted to tell them they were both being silly, and show them the error of their ways.

Ultimately though, she did nothing, and breakfast passed for all of Hogwarts in one of its most quiet meals of all time. Most of Gryffindor were subdued because of the obvious tension, and the other houses shared quiet whispers with each other, wondering what happened with Harry and Ron rather than trading vacation stories as they might have done otherwise.

It was the longest day of Harry's life; that day after breakfast when classes resumed. As luck would have it, the first day back to school was Thursday, and that meant Harry's first class was DADA; the only class he shared with Ron.

Hermione tried to get Harry alone in the hallway before the final bell rang, but he didn't have much to say. She wanted to know what he and Ron had said to each other, and apparently she tried talking to Ron earlier. Ron hadn't said a word, and Harry planned to follow suit. Hermione's interfering over the years was sometimes unwanted, sometimes gratefully appreciated, but this was one of the times that Harry knew no matter how much she nagged, or how often she whined, she wouldn't get any answers out of him.

Ron had been seated already when the two friends entered (between Dean and Seamus), so Harry was grateful for at least avoiding that awkward situation. Ron's normal seat was right next to Harry, and thankfully he had taken it upon himself to move. So Harry sat at his regular desk, but Hermione didn't follow behind him. She was angry that Harry refused to tell her about his fight with Ron, so she sat with Terry Boot, a Ravenclaw, who'd been her Arithmancy partner for the past three years.

That left Harry sitting alone; an ugly remembrance of his primary school days, until the last student entered the room as the bell rang. Neville; stumbling over his untied shoe with a bag full of books; saw that Harry was alone, and moved to sit besides him. His intentions were good, and Harry appreciated that he supposed, but he swore under his breath all the same. Neville sitting next to him was the last thing he needed. Neville had been a major issue in Ron's recent bout of jealousy, and a quick look over to the fuming redhead (pretending not to notice Harry's new neighbor) confirmed his worry. Things were not going well.

Luckily the class ended after an eventless lecture on the advantages of self transfiguration in retaliation to elemental attacks. Harry missed most of it he was so lost in his own thoughts, and almost ran from the room when the bell rang. He had a free period before lunch, and desperately needed some advice. Remus's office was his destination, but a sign said Remus was away for the week (probably still on assignment for Dumbledore). Harry, discouraged and just plain tired, made his way back to Gryffindor Tower after that. Not knowing where else to go, or what else to do, the solitary confinement of his trunk had become very appealing.

The rest of the week passed much the same way for Harry. Quidditch practice hadn't restarted, his double was missing as Harry obviously hadn't resumed traveling to the past again, and not knowing what else to do, Harry spent most of his time outside of class in his trunk, either dictating long lost spells and potion ingredients with Seth, or working on his anti-Dementor Arithmancy project which had lately hit a brick wall. Not even during mealtime, or his reinitialized Occlumency practice, did Harry's mood improve. In fact, he even

skived off of his Transfiguration and Arithmancy classes, he was so down. Ginny and Hermione told both teachers he simply wasn't feeling well, and luckily because of his progress, were told that as long as Harry turned in the assigned homework, they'd let him miss the one class without further discipline.

The fact was, most of the school was so caught up in news of the upcoming dance, that most people avoided Harry's dour mood in favor of more pleasant conversations. And Harry had to admit, he didn't mind in the least that no "fangirls" had come up to him yet, asking him out as he feared. Hopefully, they'd all get dates before he calmed down, and he could go to the dance stag, or maybe not at all. Not having to lead a dance this year, Harry saw no reason why he wouldn't be allowed to skip it. Maybe the first and second years could use a volunteer chaperon?

It was the looks on Harry's friends' faces that caused him the most pain. Just because he was at odds with Ron, didn't mean he had to be snappy to Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. Luna he wasn't worried about, as nothing seemed to bother her. It was frustrating though, because he was constantly in such a bad mood. At least his friends seemed to understand. They knew Harry just needed to get used to the new relationship, and he'd soon calm down. As such, Neville spent most of his free time with Frank and Phillip, and Ginny made off with Luna whenever she got the chance. Hermione, not wanting to take sides between Harry and Ron, was possibly in the worst position of anyone, and she wasn't about to spend time with her dingbat roommates. Unsurprisingly, Hermione put more time in at the library that first week back than ever before.

They gave Ron space too, although the space he needed was a little different. Where Harry was moody and brooding to himself the whole week, Ron was continuing on like normal, acting as if nothing was the matter. He ate with gusto at mealtimes, played chess and Exploding Snap in the evenings, and even pestered Hermione for homework help after he procrastinated his assignments for too long. The only thing that changed was where Harry had previously been his best friend, now Dean and Seamus filled that slot. He was still on friendly terms with Hermione and the others (not so much with Neville though), but since they felt awkward being near him and not being

allowed to include or even mention Harry, Ron spent most of his time with his new mates.

Finally the weekend arrived, and Harry for the first time since his fight with Ron was looking forward to some free time. Now that the new term had started, Harry needed to do a few things to catch up with his study schedule. He had to set new goals, perhaps enlist some help in his Arithmancy project that had suffered a recent setback, write lesson plans for the D.A., and Harry still had to fully interrogate his last batch of captured Death Eaters. The Lestrange brothers especially would have much information on Voldemort and his actions, and Harry knew he couldn't put them off any longer.

"Neville," Harry called out across the noisy common room. "You got a minute?" The whole house had just returned from lunch Saturday afternoon, and Harry had decided that he wanted to spend the time until dinner in his trunk with the Lestranges. The other three he'd interrogated that mornings, but besides some useless speculation on their part and the names of a few more new recruits, they didn't know much of anything. Christopher Parkinson had been interesting to question because of his personal knowledge of events through Pansy, but even he was more bark than bite. Rudolphus Lestrange had clearly been the brains of the operation though, and Harry decided he might like some back up for the arduous task.

"Sure Harry," Neville cheerfully answered. He'd been talking with Ginny and Frank, possibly trying to arrange a pick-up game of Quidditch, but left them to join Harry in a corner normally reserved for the first years.

Since Ron was still not talking to Harry (though he did stop making faces at him), Harry had been careful to only sit in his customary place by the fire when he knew Ron was in class or otherwise occupied. After that first horrific day, as per their agreement Ron and Harry had stopped being nasty to each other, but were a long ways away from being friends again. In fact, the most friendly thing that had happened so far, was that the day before, when Ron entered the sixth year's dorm bathroom to brush his teeth, Harry had silently passed Ron his toothpaste, and Ron had thanked him.

"Neville," Harry explained when the two were alone and he verified that no one was close enough to overhear him. "I'm going to spend the afternoon in my trunk, talking to the Lestranges; finding out what they might know about Voldemort and other Death Eaters. I was wondering, hoping really, that you might want to join me. I know that you and the Lestranges have some personal issues, and I thought I'd give you the chance to confront them if you want. I'd also really appreciate the help. An extra mind when questioning them might help me loads. Sometimes I'm so focused on something one of these scum say, I completely miss something else important."

Neville looked pleased to be asked, but was very nervous as well. Not only was the interrogation illegal, but these were the people who had tortured his parents into insanity so many years ago. Could he be impartial enough to divine useful information, let alone pay attention enough to even gleam what they were saying?

"I don't know if I'd be any good Harry," Neville stammered, "but I'd be happy to try. I don't know for sure if I'll be able to stay the whole time though. Depending on what they say, I'm not sure if I could take them gloating about what they did to my Mum and Dad."

"They won't gloat Neville," Harry assured him, "I promise you that. Under the influence of Veritaserum, not only are you required to tell the whole truth, but you're also unable to gloat or brag or basically say anything that's not an answer to a question. You don't even have to be in the same room if you don't want to Nev. You can stay outside the cell and just watch through the transparent door if you want."

"No, I want to be there." Neville sounded quite sure of himself. "I want them to see me, and I want them to know the son of people they tortured helped capture them." There was a small quiver in Neville's voice, but Harry didn't think badly of him for it. In fact, all things considered, Harry realized how incredibly brave Neville sitting in on the Lestranges' interrogation would be.

In was less than a half hour later that both boys found themselves in the seventh compartment of Harry's trunk. Ron was in the room as both entered, causing a few awkward moments and looks from all

parties, but once they approached the cells, all thoughts of Ron were forgotten.

Casting the spell to make the solid oak doors transparent from the outside only, Harry took the opportunity to make sure all his fifteen prisoners were present and accounted for, and not up to anything suspicious. Sean Hazelton and all his other fellow new recruits were more or less broken, and when not crying, quietly spent the day sleeping or reading the few books Harry supplied them. Interestingly enough, Crabbe and Goyle seniors were acting much the same way. They'd never cried, but both men had given up hope of rescue, and spent their days quietly doing nothing. Either they were biding their time, or were just unsure what to do without instruction; Harry wasn't sure. The Death Eater couple the Parkers had tried the longest of any of them to escape and cause commotion, but now over a month after their capture, had finally settled down. And of course Avery, Harry's previous favorite captive, was as surly as ever. Winky especially did not like going near the man, as whenever she emptied his waste bucket, or brought him his daily meals, he often snapped at her and screamed, even though he couldn't see through his cell's door.

But it wasn't any of them that Harry was interested in. No, it was his newest two captures, the Lestranges, that were his destination. Only being a little over a week since their imprisonment, Harry wondered for the first time what the brothers thought was happening to them. Did they think they were being detained by the Ministry? Did they think their imprisonment was some form of punishment in the afterlife? There were so many possibilities, and because they hadn't seen a single living being since their capture, Harry couldn't imagine what he'd think in their place.

Choosing Rodolphus to interrogate first, as he was the one that Harry had dueled, and therefore had more of a relationship with, Harry animated the cell's shackles to grab hold of their prisoner, and chain him to the wall. Without any warning on Lestrange's part, they accomplished their task quickly, and only when Harry was convinced the Death Eater was secured with only a minimal amount of free movement, did he bother to unlock and unward the door.

"Potter," Lestrange hissed as soon as Harry peeked his head through. Harry simply nodded, and motioned behind him for Neville to follow.

Upon seeing the second boy, Lestrange's eyes grew even more guarded. "And Longbottom. What is the meaning of this? Has the Ministry sunk so low as to allow mere teenagers the chance to come and triumph. Have no fear, my master will see to my release soon, and then I'll be the one gloating over your dead bodies!"

"What Ministry?" Harry asked. "I only see the three of us here."

"The Ministry aurors and guards of course! No doubt they allowed your visit to rattle me. Well, it won't work. They will get nothing from me."

Neville in the background gave a small nervous laugh, but silenced himself when it echoed off the naked stone walls. Trying to intimidate Lestrange further, Harry conjured up two comfortable chairs for he and Neville to sit in (a safe distance away of course), and brought out two warm butterbeers from his pockets. Handing one to Neville and gesturing him to sit, Harry took a long pull from his drink before returning his attention to Lestrange once again.

"Ministry, huh," he taunted. "Sorry to burst your bubble their Rudy, but the Ministry is the least of your problems. As far as they know, you portkeyed out of St. Mungo's along with the rest of your team when you failed your mission. In fact, besides the two of us, there's only one other person who knows you're even here, and I'm confident that that person won't be helping you anytime soon. Welcome to my personal prison." Harry relished the shock, and even small fright he caught in Lestrange's eyes aided by the small amount of Legilimency he knew.

"We haven't come to gloat," Neville spoke up for the first time, "although we'd have the right too. Instead we've come to see what you know about other Death Eaters, and Vo-Voldemort." Harry whipped his head around to stare at Neville, surprised and very pleased he used Voldemort's real name for once, even if it was with a small hesitation. Lestrange was equally stunned, but after a moment of silence, laughed at the two of them.

"Do you mean to tell me that the two of you are holding me at an unsecure location without any type of backup, and without even informing the Ministry of my capture?" He was laughing again, but silently so was Harry on the inside. Rodolphus just hadn't realized his situation yet. "You two are idiots. I'll never tell you anything you want to know, and I'll be out of here before either of you grow your first pub!"

'Too late for that,' Harry thought off handedly, disgusted at the Death Eater's choice of words. Neville clearly didn't know what to say next, so Harry began in with the plan he had come up with, to maximize Lestrange's uneasiness before proceeding with his questions.

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand your situation here Rudy," Harry was pleased to see his nickname wasn't liked. "Laugh all you want, but you happen to be in a very secure location, and will not be escaping anytime soon. I've confiscated your wand as I'm sure you've realized by now, as well as the emergency portkey and vial of poison you'd had hidden in your robes. And if you don't believe I'm capable of holding you here, why not just ask your fellow inmates." Brandishing his wand with ease, Harry turned the cell's walls transparent, so now Lestrange too could see out into the larger room, and see into the other occupied cells. Harry didn't leave him much time to get a good look at everyone, but in the two seconds before Harry turned the walls back, Harry was sure Rodolphus had at least seen his brother in the next cell, as well as the sheer number of people he was holding.

"Wha...what is this place? Why haven't we been turned into the Minsitry!" Lestrange shouted. "We have legal rights you know, and I demand to be turned over to the proper authorities!"

This time, it was Harry's turn to laugh. "What's wrong Rudy, concerned for yourself? And you expect me to be worried about your legal rights? That's rich, coming from you. I'm not daft! Right now, the Ministry's so incompetent and unprepared, they couldn't hold you for any amount of time without risking your escape. That's why you're here, and why you'll stay here until Azkaban can be secured again.

Now, just like everyone else here has, tell me all you know bout Voldemort and his future plans.”

“You’re mad!” Lestrange shouted. “You’re even madder than Bella! There’s not a chance in hell that I’d tell you anything, nor would anyone else. You’re bluffing.”

Grinning at the man’s discomfort, Harry produced a small vial of clear liquid and held it delicately between his thumb and fingers. It was the first time Neville showed any emotion too, for he also had a greedy look in his eyes. For minutes he’d worried that Lestrange would not answer their questions, or not truthfully at least. Now, he had no need to doubt.

“You can’t!” Clearly, Lestrange knew what was in the vial. “That’s against the law. You’ll be thrown in Azkaban Potter, if you use it against me. The distribution of Veritaserum is strictly monitored, and can only be used when a subject is willing. I’m not willing!”

“You still seem to think you’re being held by the Ministry, Rudy. You’re not. You’re in my world now, and I’m not asking whether you’re willing. Stupefy!”

Not having even seen Harry’s wand, Lestrange slumped forward in his chains while Harry got up and administered three drops of the truth serum. Harry could have forced it down his throat to further intimidate the man, but thought that might go beyond the realms of good taste. Harry had to admit he was finding pleasure in scaring the man, partly on Neville’s behalf in retribution for his parents, but knew that couldn’t be helped. After so long in a position of power, and with such blatant disregard for laws and people’s lives, Harry couldn’t help but feel that Lestrange’s fall from glory was fitting.

“Are you sure about this Harry?” Neville asked. “He’s right you know. What we’re doing is illegal, and we could get into a lot of trouble for this. Eventually you’ll have to turn the Lestranges over to the Minstry, and they’ll find out at some point. I’m not sure this is such a good idea anymore.”

"Don't worry Neville. I've done a lot more to get in trouble about, and I'm not that worried about it. It will be a problem, sure, when I turn myself in. But let me worry about that when the time comes. And since I'm the one doing this, you can't get in any trouble. I take full responsibility for all this. In the meantime though, at least I'm sure I've got dangerous Death Eaters off the street, and that they can't escape and rejoin Voldemort."

"Do you need to be so cruel though?" Neville wondered out loud. "I mean, I have no love for him, but he does have rights. Morally at least, if not legally."

Harry just shrugged. "I can't deny that I'm enjoying this Neville, but I'm not being that way on purpose. I've never actually done this before. Usually I just stun the person before I enter the cell, and then dose them up without explaining anything. I just wanted to try some intimidation, you know? Good cop, bad cop and all that. At least now we can get to some answers."

Neville was satisfied with Harry's answer, and let him get back to work. Lestrange could have been revived right then, but Harry wanted to test out another theory he had. It was no accident that he used his personal stunner to knock out Lestrange. He was still experimenting with the spell, and had a few more ideas. So appeasing to Neville's curiosity, Harry handed over his wand, and waited to see if Neville could revive Lestrange with it. Harry wasn't sure if the spell was limited to his own magic use, or just that of a specific wand. He had a theory, and hoped that he was right.

And he was. Even after three separate attempts, once after a full minute of concentration, Neville was unable to revive Lestrange. Taking his own wand back, Harry was able to in less than a second. That confirmed his theory, and quite eased his mind. When Harry had had the thought that someone else might be able to use his own wand to revive a stunned person, not only was that a less than satisfactory thought (it wasn't in the spell building he's planned on), but the thought occurred to him that other wands might be able to do the same. More specifically, brother wands.

If Voldemort was able to counter Harry's modified spell, simply because their two wands shared a brother core, then a lot of the planning and work that Harry had done would have gone to waste. Luckily, Neville proved the wand wasn't the personal signature that was needed, but the person himself. Happy with the finding, Harry was sure Voldemort's wand wouldn't be an issue.

Getting back to Lestrange though, Harry let Neville ask some of the initial, obvious questions. Things like which other Death Eaters he knew by name, what attacks he had participated in, if there were any new Death Eater hide outs that had formed recently, and what some of Voldemort's future plans were. Neville wasn't surprised by any of the answers (they didn't mean a lot to him as this was his first session), but Harry was pleased with the number of answers delivered up to him.

Not only did Lestrange name at least four other high ranking Death Eaters he hadn't known about previously (and their locations), but he also confirmed the location of one of Voldemort's bases of operation. There were only two. On top of that, Harry found out where some of the Dementors under Voldemort's control were being held, and cross referencing that with the location of some of the major muggle attacks in recent weeks, Harry thought he might be able to thin the Dementor population once again. That led to random thoughts about his related Arithmancy project, and the released souls still in hiding at the Shrieking Shack, but Harry shook those thoughts from his mind to concentrate more clearly on Lestrange's answers.

When Harry took over questioning, he was able to finesse more detailed and crucial answers from Lestrange. He'd already found out about the Death Eater's financial status, but now Harry also added to his list the place where Lestrange had been staying, and who else resided there. With him and his brother no longer in circulation, only Bellatrix his wife, and two others were left to defend the house on the outskirts of Bristol. Harry was also pleased to hear that in a secret vault room in the house's basement, Voldemort had ordered a small supply of galleons, illegal and dangerous potions, and Dark Art artifacts and books stored there in case one of his other bases should unlikely be discovered. The information wasn't damaging to Voldemort directly, but by taking out the house, capturing any Death

Eaters inside (hopefully he's complete the Lestrange set), and confiscating all the hidden contraband, Harry hoped he could deal Voldemort another substantial financial blow, and a blow to the morals of his troops.

After more than two hours Harry was done with his questions, and the Veritaserum had started to wear off anyway. It was only because he made the polite gesture to Neville asking him if he had any remaining questions, that Neville actually spoke up. He must have been debating with himself for the full two hours whether he wanted to ask the question, because Harry could tell Neville was nervous. Once Neville spoke though, Harry knew it was more likely that Neville had struggled with the question more like his entire life.

“Why did you attack and torture my parents?”

Enough of the Veritaserum had worn off by then to allow Lestrange some emotion back in his responses, and he sneered at the question.

“Because they were there,” he answered. “Because they were there, and they were easy targets. My Lord has just been defeated, nobody knew why or how, and I was angry. You’re parents just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Young Bartemius was especially angry about our Master’s rumored death, as he had just joined our fold only weeks previous. Your parents gave him the opportunity to vent his frustration.”

Harry was sickened by how callous the man sounded, even while under the truth serum’s influence. Lestrange really was evil.

“So there was no reason?” Neville asked. “It wasn’t a planned attack, or to gather information about what had happened to Vo-Voldemort? It was just an accident?” Harry couldn’t tell whether Neville was angry or relieved.

“It was no accident,” Lestrange yelled. “Your parents were aurors, and known members who sided with Dumbledore against my Lord. They were always on the list to die! They will still die, once my Master releases me and takes his rightful place as the ruler of the magical

world! The timing of coming across them was the only unplanned event."

That was enough for Harry, and by seeing how much Neville was shaking, he figured both of them had had enough. Stunning Lestrange once more, Harry removed the man from his bonds, and vanquished the two conjured chairs he had previously conjured. Then making sure everything was secure, and nothing had fallen out of his or Neville's pockets that Lestrange might be able to use, Harry locked and rewarded the door.

Not knowing what to say or how to act, Harry just remained silent as Neville sat down in the large room just outside row of cells, and thought to himself. He still had Rabastan to interrogate, and not much time before dinner to do it. If Neville wasn't up to it, he understood of course, but couldn't spend the whole afternoon making sure Neville was alright. Luckily after about three minutes, Neville rose from his seat with a more hardened look in his eyes, and said he was ready for the next Lestrange brother. Harry didn't know if it was wise or not, but Harry wasn't about to suggest that to his friend.

Rabastan Lestrange's interrogation didn't take nearly as long. Most of what he knew Rodolphus had already spilt, and even then he didn't know as much as his older brother. By asking questions, Harry found out that the two often worked as a team, but Rodolphus was the real leader in the family. Not only was he more magically powerful, but he was more intelligent too, actually being one of the few Death Eaters to come not from Slytherin house, but Ravenclaw instead. Rabastan was little more than a thug, who over the years was elevated to a more perceived threat due to his name's infamy. Therefore there wasn't much he could add to the information that Harry already had. His session was only used to confirm previous answers offered by other captives, and to fill in any blank holes that Harry had unforeseen.

One blank hole, which Neville had caught and Harry had almost hit himself for forgetting to ask about, was how the operation at St. Mungos' had been planned so carefully. Harry had heard bits from Rodolphus during their duel that Draco had provided information to his father which had then been passed on, and forgotten to follow up

on it. Ideally, Harry was already wondering if he could catch Malfoy alone, maybe during one of his prefect patrols, and interrogate the boy himself. After he was done a mild memory charm would prevent him from knowing that he'd even seen Harry that night, let alone that he'd spilled his guts to him. Harry was getting quite good at memory charms now, with the fifteen Death Eaters to practice on. It wasn't part of his training regimen per say, but whenever he got bored or had some free time, he snuck into his trunk's seventh compartment to practice. The memory charms he'd given all five of his newly captured prisoners just the week before was proof of that. That's why neither Lestrange reacted to Harry's admission that they had no rights, and were surprised and worried when he produced the vial of Veritaserum. After Harry had used it the first time to get all their financial information, Harry obliterated them all to forget the entire session.

Back to Neville's question though, it seems the whole operation had been planned by Rodolphus around Draco's information. He'd been able to find out that Neville was staying with Harry during the holidays, and that Neville never failed to miss visiting his parents in the mental ward on Christmas day. Taking into consideration that Harry was at odds with Dumbledore at the time, and would most likely be unprotected, the opportunity was too good to pass up. The only incorrect information they'd received, which led to much of the plan's disastrous result, was that Draco had boasted with conviction that Neville was nothing more than a slightly talented squib, and wouldn't be of any help in a fight. Apparently, he was either denying Neville's recent change in attitude and abilities, or was genuinely convinced it was nothing more than rumor and a recent lucky streak. Draco was convinced that Harry would be the only obstacle, and even then his arrogance refused to admit that he had a talent for defense.

The interrogation finished quickly after that, and both satisfied with a day's work, Harry and Neville exited the trunk and had a chance to shower before dinner. Neither really needed it, as they'd not done much other than sit in a chair for the past five hours. But after talking to two of the evilest men in England for the past half day, both boys felt as if they should wash.

Dinner passed quickly and uneventfully. Ron must have mentioned to someone that he'd seen Harry and Neville disappear into the trunk right after lunch, because Ginny and Frank inquired what they'd been

doing for so long. Not wanting to lie, but not able to tell the truth either, Harry just made up a story about practicing dueling in the trunk's dueling chamber, as the two had done often enough during the holidays. It was no secret that Harry had offered to help Neville in defense, and was believable enough. After that, talk turned to Quidditch and the upcoming resumed practices, and even Ron joined in one point. He never talked directly to Harry, but the fact that he didn't yell or scream was pleasant enough all things considered. Harry just hoped that once back on the field, their strain wouldn't affect either's ability to play. Neither seeker nor keeper required much team work, but their attitude if left unchecked could still affect the team's overall performance. Harry vowed not to let that happen.

It wasn't till after dinner, when Harry was walking with his friends and planning on a relaxing night of playing chess and some light reading, that he was interrupted by McGonagall and asked to stay behind. He signaled to Neville and Ginny to go ahead, not knowing how long he'd be, and only after the Great Hall had cleared out did Harry's Head of House speak again.

"Mr. Potter, the staff can't help but notice your recent spilt from your friend Mr. Weasley. Against the Headmaster's orders I would love nothing more than to throttle you both on the heads with your broomsticks until you resolved whatever issues have recently come between you. However I will not, as the Headmaster has asked me not to. He however has not prevented me from speaking to a student if they come to me voluntarily for advice, so I would like to remind you that part of my duties as your Head of House is as counselor as one might need. Please feel free to come to me at any time to discuss whatever may be troubling you. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am," Harry nodded. He felt a little touched actually, even though he had no intention of speaking his problems out with her in length. Still, especially because only weeks ago he's been forced to raise his wand against the woman, Harry felt he owed her more than that.

"It's complicated Professor," Harry began to explain. "But at the heart of the matter is Ron's being jealous again, like he did in my fourth

year when I got selected to be a Triwizard Champion. He didn't believe me then that I didn't enter myself, and we didn't talk for more than a month. Later he realized I was telling the truth, and I forgave him. This time, it's something similar. I haven't been as open with Ron as I normally am, or any of my friends for that matter, and I don't think he's taking it well. And on top of that, his parents and Percy have given him some news which he's not happy about, that relate to me in a way. I honestly don't think I've done anything wrong, and I just have to wait until Ron sees he's being a prat. Hopefully then, things can get back to normal. I just don't know how long that will take."

"I see," McGonagall said as she pursed her lips further. "I've seen no shortage of fights between friends in my time here at Hogwarts Mr. Potter, but I am surprised you've allowed the situation to escalate when the two of your have always been so close. I suggest you do whatever is in your power to resolve your friendship with Mr. Weasely as quickly as possible, to avoid any further complications. May I remind you that because of your unique status, not only the two of you, but all of Gryffindor is suffering slightly from this development."

"Well I never asked for my unique status," Harry said, not without a little anger in his voice.

"Nevertheless you have it!" McGonagall curtly replied. Then more calmly she added, "It is unfortunate that you've been forced into an adult role Harry, but now that you have, you must act accordingly. You are not able to be an adult only when it suits you, and then regress to a child when it doesn't. You were perfectly comfortable acting as an adult this past summer, when I and the rest of the Order were only doing our best to protect you. Now that you've made the transition into adulthood, you no longer get to hide behind the rest of us. Have you even thought about how the others have suffered because of your fight? Hermione looks lost in class, and I've noticed her attention start to slip. And her recent devotion to the library hasn't gone unnoticed either. All I ask is that you do what you can. Think about others as well as yourself, and if it takes a bit a groveling to make peace with Ronald, even if you're convinced you're in the right, then that is just the price you have to pay for his friendship. We are

near war with You-Know-Who Harry, and there are more pressing matters to worry about!"

Properly chastised, Harry could only lower his head and agree. "Yes Professor, I'll do my best."

"Very good Mr. Potter, that is all that I ask."

"Is that all Professor?" Harry wondered.

"No," she answered, "that was actually not the reason I asked you to remain behind. I just felt the need to offer my advice. No, the Headmaster would like to see you before you retire for the evening. The password to his office is 'humbug' and he will meet you there."

Wondering what Dumbledore wanted to speak with him about, Harry made his leave and followed the familiar path to the gargoyle at the base of the Headmaster's office's staircase.

"Humbug."

Upon arriving at the door Harry knocked to be polite, but already knew that Dumbledore wasn't in. Using his lens' x-ray vision, Harry had recently been taking to looking around every corner, and into every room before entering it. It was purely subconscious at this point. A few times he'd caught Draco and other Slytherins snooping around, and wanted to be aware of in whose presence he was talking about certain subjects.

With the office empty, but with instructions to be there, Harry felt no shame in letting himself in and making himself comfortable. Looking around, the office looked the same as always. Even Fawkes was present, perhaps a week away from his next burning. And as if she knew Harry was thinking about Fawkes, Hedwig appeared out of thin air to join her companion on his grand perch. The two had been spending a lot of time together lately, possibly even more than Harry was aware of. Apparently the two phoenixes were either unaware or unconcerned with his and Dumbledore's strained relationship, because the two got along splendidly. And with the two phoenixes engaging themselves, Harry's eyes wondered along the walls.

Most of the portraits of previous Headmasters and Headmistresses were asleep or pretending to be so, and the few that were awake weren't known to Harry, and therefore he had nothing to say to them. Phineas Nigellus was present as always, but since Harry refused to remove his other portrait from the spare bathroom where Harry was storing it in his home, the surly man had refused to talk with Harry.

At the point of almost twiddling his thumbs now, Harry was getting impatient, and left his seat to wonder around the office. Although he'd been in there plenty times before, never had he been allowed time to relax, and Harry took the time to explore. The multitude of silver instruments he'd destroyed but never understood were interesting, but Harry couldn't figure most of them out. Dumbledore's private library was more recognizable, and Harry was actually impressed with the volumes and rare texts he found. Browsing through them, only picking up and flipping through a few, Harry saw a few texts he himself owned, not to mention copies of others from the school's main library. But there were also books about the properties of magic he'd never even heard about before, as well as many foreign titles that Harry couldn't read, much less understand.

Halfway through looking at the shelves, Harry did notice one other thing out of place, but only because it had gotten him into trouble before. In the cabinets behind Dumbledore's desk, one of the doors was slightly ajar, and a soft shimmering light was emanating though it. Harry knew right away Dumbledore's pensieve was inside, and briefly wondered in the old man had set up him being alone in his office just to test Harry's curiosity. Well of course he was curious, but Harry had learned that lesson already. After first snooping in Dumbledore's memories, and then just last year in Snape's, Harry wasn't about to repeat either mistake. Instead Harry forced himself to turn away from the open cabinet, and finish looking at the many books. It wasn't too long after that that Dumbledore appeared at his office door.

"Ah, Harry. My apologies for keeping you waiting, but Mr. Filch had some questions that couldn't be avoided, which I'm afraid were rather more involved than I thought. I trust you kept yourself occupied?"

"Yes sir," Harry answered as he closed the book he was reading, and put it back on the shelf. "I was just looking through some of the books and instruments you have. It occurred to me that as often as I've visited your office, I've never really paid much attention before to anything other than yourself, Fawkes, or the portraits. You've quite the collection. I hope you don't mind that I was looking."

"Not at all Harry," Dumbledore smiled as he took his seat and popped a lemon sherbert into his mouth. "What you see before you is the culmination I've spent most of my life collecting. With the exception of a few rare finds which I feel the need to safeguard even further than in my office here, these are some of the world's most prized and informative books."

"So I've seen. Most don't mean much to me of course, but I recognize their value. I'm sure Hermione would kill to have just an hour in this room, with free rein over these books. I might be interested too if the opportunity presented itself."

Dumbledore laughed. "I'm sure you're right about Mrs. Granger, of course. She does have the mind of a Ravenclaw. It is unfortunate for them that her heart is pure Gryffindor however. Maybe one day I could arrange the two of you some time here with me. I don't mind students and staff members browsing as you did, but in-depth research I'm afraid I must oversee myself, which is the reason most of these texts aren't in regular circulation."

"Of course Professor," Harry nodded. He couldn't help but feel that he and Dumbledore were playing a game with each other. "With great power comes great responsibility."

Dumbledore's eyes lit up with excitement. "Why yes, it does, doesn't it? I've never heard it so succinctly put Harry. Do you mind if I use that from now on?"

Harry had to laugh. "Feel free professor. I'm not the one who said it. It's from a muggle comic book."

"Really? Well, how ingenious nonetheless. Quite amazing, muggles are, and how even without magic they are sometimes so similar to us. Anyway, we're getting away from ourselves."

"Yes," Harry agreed, "Professor McGonagall said you wanted to see me, and I doubt it's to discuss children's comics."

"Quite right you are, Harry." Then, turning in his chair, Dumbledore opened the cabinet behind him fully and pulled out his pensieve. Without another word, he placed it on his desk and cleared some paperwork into a drawer.

"I didn't look, Professor," was all Harry could think to say. "I did notice that your cabinet was slightly open, and I could see the light from your pensieve, but I swear I didn't look. I learned my lesson the last time."

"Professor Snape would disagree with you Harry." Dumbledore was neither accusing nor forgiving in his statement, and Harry realized it was not meant to barb him, but only said as an observation.

"Professor Snape would disagree with a lot of things I have to say, Professor." Harry tried to keep the disdain out of his voice, but wasn't completely successful. "That's the last time I was referring to. And might I add, he wasn't completely innocent in that encounter either."

"What do you mean by that Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "From what I've been told, Professor Snape left you in his office momentarily, and while he was gone you invaded his privacy by looking into some of his most embarrassing memories."

'So he told you?"

"Yes, he did," Dumbledore said.

"Then you should know," Harry answered, "he left those memories there, and me alone with them, to provoke me. He wanted me to witness them. Probably just for the chance to punish me, but also so I'd feel bad about what my father had done. As you may know Professor, I have a pensieve of my own now, and have learned to

use one properly. Depositing a memory into a pensieve doesn't remove the memory from one's mind. It only allow for you to go over the memory in more detail; greater detail than you could previously recall unaided. Snape said he was removing memories so that I wouldn't chance to see them. I know now he was lying. Clearly he was counting on me snooping when I had the chance. Frankly, I'm proud that I lasted so long. He must have used your pensieve over a dozen times before I finally succumbed to looking in it."

Dumbledore didn't respond, but had a small smile on his face. Finally, he clasped his hands and said, "Well, I was not aware you were so proficient in the use of a pensieve Harry, and no doubt neither is Professor Snape. I suggest you not confront him about it, by the way. But that is not the reason I brought you here. I believe you that you did not 'snoop' in my memories, Harry. Rather, I am merely inviting you to. I have a few memories which I'd like you to view. Call it a belated Christmas present, if you will."

"So you want me to look in your pensieve?" Harry asked, astonished.

"Yes. Don't worry though, I've been sure to remove any extraneous memories that I don't wish you to see. Oddly enough, I haven't had my head this full in a long while. Enough talk though. Since you've experience, I trust you'll be able to extract yourself when you're done, and I won't have to fetch you as I did the last time?"

"Er," Harry was caught of guard, "no sir. I'm able to leave just fine."

"Well then, please proceed. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes, and I'll be here waiting when you return."

Unsure about the invitation, but curious as hell, Harry simply leaned forward and reached for the stone basin. For a moment Harry was worried that Dumbledore was using the pensieve as a distraction to use Legilimency on him, and made sure to bring his mental shields to full alert before he dipped his finger inside the shimmering liquid. Hopefully once inside, he'd still be able to detect Dumbledore's invasion if that were the case.

Once his finger touched the silver strands though, Harry felt himself toppling head over heels as he somersaulted into Dumbledore's memories. And as if that weren't disorientating enough, when he landed, it appeared to be in the exact same spot he had left. He was still in Dumbledore's office.

But the moment he saw what he was witnessing, Harry knew Dumbledore's offer was a genuine gift, and not some distraction. There were only two people in room besides himself. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk as normal, with a cheerful laugh bellowing with his voice, and McGonagall was sitting opposite him, with the world's worst pucker on her face. She had just eaten a Warhead!

Now Harry remembered! Months ago when he'd given Dumbledore a package of the sour sweet, he requested to view any memories of either Professor McGonagall or Snape if they had the opportunity to try one. What he was witnessing now was just the end result. Harry had no idea how the Headmaster had gotten McGonagall to eat the treat (the memory didn't extend that far back), but just watching McGonagall's expression as she refused to spit the candy out was priceless enough.

When the memory ended, Harry fully expected the show to be over, so imagine his surprise when a similar scene played out, only this time with Professor Flitwick as the intended victim. He seemed to enjoy himself more than McGonagall had, and his tiny squeaks were interrupted by his well-known laughter.

After that, Harry watched as the complete Hogwarts staff were all subjected to the intensely sour lemon candies. Madam Pomfrey had perhaps the most surprised reaction, and only Professor Sprout spit the sweet out into her hand, but warily licked it until the sour layer was dispersed. Hagrid didn't even notice the sour taste (must be something about giant taste buds), and Filch outright spat the candy onto the floor, and not even Mrs. Norris would approach it then.

The best reaction though, the one that Harry had never in a million years expected to see, was when Snape was offered the candy, and begrudgingly indulged the Headmaster by eating it. Then when the flavor hit, Harry could tell the man wanted nothing more than to spit

out the candy like those before him had, but his pride wouldn't allow him. Never one to admit defeat, and always one to think himself better than others, Snape continued to suck the candy until it was gone, and tried the whole time not to show any reaction whatsoever. He failed miserably of course (they really were sour), but his facial expressions as he failed to hide his reaction were so entertaining, even Dumbledore in the memory nearly bent over in jest.

With the full staff put through their paces, Harry made ready to leave the pensieve, when another memory started playing. It was Diagon Alley as Harry recognized, and thinking that the Headmaster wouldn't have included it unless he meant for Harry to view it, Harry made himself comfortable as he took a better look around. Christmas decorations were still displayed, but some were being taken down, so Harry guessed it was a recent memory; one that happened after Christmas day. And in attendance besides the crowds, were of course Professor Dumbledore, and none other than once again, Snape.

"Really Albus," Snape was saying as they passed Gringotts and continued down the street, "I am, perfectly capable of watching after myself, and do not need your constant supervision. I wish you'd just return to Hogwarts and leave me be!"

"Now Severus," Dumbledore chided him. "As much respect as I hold for your abilities, they are nonetheless unavailable to you at the moment without a working wand. It is unfortunate that your previous one was broken, as it matched you so well, but in a few short minutes we'll find you a replacement, and you won't require my services any longer. Until that time though, you remain in danger from retaliation from Voldemort, and I am not willing to risk your safety by allowing you to wonder the streets unprotected, no matter your pride."

Snape had a few choice words to say after that, mostly about how his wand was broken and blaming Harry for the entire thing, but Harry wasn't paying much attention to the rantings he was all too familiar with. Instead, Harry looked around and realized this must have happened just a day or two after Harry had snapped his old wand. Harry didn't bother to pay attention again until they approached Ollivander's shop, and stepped inside.

"Ah, Albus, how are you? How unexpected to see you here! And Severus Snape, I remember you as a boy of course, so eager to get your first wand. What brings you two to my shop?"

"Hello Octavius," Dumbledore greeted him. "It has been some time, yes. I see you still carry the same wands in your display window however, so much must not have changed. We are here to provide Severus with a replacement wand. His old one broke, you see, and currently he is quite unarmed."

"More has changed than you know, Albus. I've recently come into a cache of wand cores I was previously unable to obtain, and they have been very interesting to work with. So far I've mostly experimented, but I have managed to produce five new wands with very powerful cores. I only hope that I shall see them selected by a wizard within my lifetime. Being so rare, I hardly know what to expect. It isn't often that that happens to me, you know. So Mr. Snape, need a replacement wand, do you? I trust you have the broken pieces and a certificate from the Ministry?"

Wordlessly, Snape extracted both from his voluminous robes, and placed them down on the counter. Then, to his indignation, he had to stand still as Ollivander proceeded to prod his wand arm for accurate measurements. Watching Snape stand there like a schoolboy was highly amusing to Harry.

As the man worked, he continued to converse with mostly Dumbledore, although he was forced to ask Snape a few clarifying questions. Apparently his old wand was twelve and a quarter inches long, and made of birch with a dragon heartstring core. Snape wanted his new wand as close to his old one as possible, he said, so it wouldn't be common knowledge that he had broken his old one. In the wizarding world, especially among purebloods like his Slytherin house, having your wand broken, for whatever reason, was a bit of an embarrassment.

"I'll try, of course, but I can't guarantee anything. It's the wand that chooses the wizard, after all, I always say." Dumbledore was smiling

as Ollivander disappeared to the back of his shop for some candidates, and Snape merely rolled his eyes.

The next half hour passed rather uneventfully in Harry opinion. None of the wands Ollivander presented to Snape worked all that well, but at least none of them blew up parts of the shop. Snape was skilled enough with a wand to not cause destruction, even with the worst matched wand, unlike Harry so many years ago. Eventually he got impatient though, and Snape demanded that Ollivader hurry up.

“Choosing a wand is no business to rush though just for the sake of saving time,” Ollivander looked most displeased. “I’ve already tested you with all the birch and dragon heartstring wands I’ve available, and none come close to fitting you. A most difficult case to be sure, but I’ve not failed yet. Maybe a wand made of pussywillow...”

“I will not be outfitted with a wand made of pussywillow,” Snape snapped, outraged at such a suggestion. “You will find me a more suitable wand befitting my stature. What of those new wand cores you spoke of? I’d be interested to have a wand unlike anyone else, if what you claim is true.”

Dumbledore was quietly chuckling in the background (as was Harry), but Ollivander was looking more than a little annoyed. “Sir, I do not presume to instruct you how to make a proper potion, so kindly return the favor and do not instruct me on how to perform my profession.”

“My apologies,” Snape barely got out, “I am merely in a foul mood from having my wand broken. Still, if the new wands are as unique as you say, then surely they haven’t been tested with that many people yet. I see no harm in trying them myself, to see if they’re suitable.”

“I don’t think they’d match properly with you,” Ollivander considered, “but I suppose there’s no harm in trying. Please excuse me for a moment; the wands I speak of are still in my workshop.”

Ollivander left through a back door, and Snape and Dumbeldore traded small talk while they waited. Harry in the mean time was nervous, as he knew perfectly well what new wand cores Ollivander was talking about. If Snape, or worse yet Dumbledore, matched the

Basilisk fangs to Harry being down in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry had no idea how they'd respond.

"Here they are," Ollivander called out on his return, with a velvet lined wood case in hand. Opening them up, Harry saw most of the case was empty, as there were only five wands displayed. And those five wands looked no different than any other wand he'd ever seen. Somehow, Harry expected wands made from basilisk fangs to appear black, or evil somehow.

Snape seemed unimpressed until he lifted one, and green flames erupted out the end. Catching at least three shelves on fire, Snape dropped the wand in shock, as Dumbledore calmly extinguished the blaze.

"My word, they are powerful, aren't they?" Even Ollivander looked surprised. "I don't think I've elicited such a response from an unmatched wand and wizard over the age of twenty in a very long time."

Regaining his control, Snape had to agree. "What type of wand core did you say these had again?"

"I didn't say," Ollivander answered. "But if you'd like to know, they have the wand core from basilisk fangs. As you well know, basilisks were extremely rare even hundreds of years ago, and even then my ancestors never used them as wand cores because they were too dangerous to harvest. Why, I don't think a basilisk has been spotted in almost a quarter of a century. It was pure luck I happened to come into contact with someone who would not only be able to provide me with such materials, but was willing to part with them as well."

"Basilisk fangs!" Snape looked almost giddy, but Harry caught the pensive look in Dumbledore's eye. Snape was too excited to think clearly, but Harry knew that Dumbledore at least knew the truth behind the wand cores' appearance.

Still, he kept his mouth shut, and Snape nearly assaulted the old wandmaker to allow him to try the rest. "One of these must match with me. Is one of these five perhaps in birch?"

"Not birch no," Ollivander lamented, "but this one is similar." Ollivander presented another wand to Snape, but drew it back at the last possible moment before Snape was able to grab it. "I must insist you be careful though, as I really do believe your temperament is not suited to basilisk fangs."

"Nonsense man," Snape explained. "I am a former practitioner of the dark arts, a lover of snakes and potion ingredients, and Head of Slytherin House. I doubt there is a man alive, save few, who are more worthy of such a wand. I'm sure one of the remaining ones will match me."

Ollivander handed him the wand, but shared a look with Dumbledore.

Needless to say, not a single one of the basilisk fang core wands even came close to matching to Snape. Three more shot flames he was unable to control, and the last burnt his hand so bad that Dumbledore had to apply a temporary cooling charm on his hand to relieve the pain.

After Ollivander put the special case away (and Snape grumbled some more about incompetent wandmakers), the three returned to the arduous task of finding Snape a proper wand. It was another twenty minutes, and almost a hundred wands later, when Ollivander finally took a strange pause and his eyes locked in on a specific box on a shelf close by.

"I wonder," he muttered to himself, before approaching the box without informing the others what he was thinking. A moment later he came back with a box in hand, and a look Harry recognized in his eyes. Ollivander was almost sure he'd finally found a match.

"Please try this wand Mr. Snape. I believe you will be happy with the results."

With at least one of them being somewhat confident, Snape was willing to try anything at that point, and took the offered wand in hand. Almost immediately, a cool breeze blew through the musty room, and

Snape's eyes widened as he felt the power rush through his being. "This is the one," he said.

"Ah, I thought so," Ollivander said, with a smug look on his face. "You have been a difficult customer for sure Severus Snape, but I've not yet failed to match a wand to a wizard. Curious though...very curious."

Harry almost did a double take when Ollivander said that; it was so similar to his own wand choosing experience. 'What was curious,' Harry wondered. 'What was curious?'

"What is curious," Snape asked. Harry laughed at the irony.

"I have been making wands in this very shop for over a hundred years, Mr. Snape, and have never forgotten a single customer I've ever had. What is so curious, I find, is that the wand you've chosen has a wand core made from unicorn hair, who gave just a single other hair. Just one, which is most unusual for unicorns as you must know."

"My wand has a unicorn hair core?" Snape asked with distaste. "That is unusual. Normally I'd refuse such a wand, except that I've tried nearly every other wand in your shop, and I cannot deny the wand feels more closely matched than even my original did."

"That is very possibly Mr. Snape, as the wand was only crafted about eighteen years ago. It would make sense that since it was not in existence when you originally visited my wand, it could be better suited to you than your original. No, what I think curious, is that not a few months ago, your wand's brother wand was also sold in my shop, and that in and of itself is strange..

"Really," Snape asked. "He must be a powerful wizard then."

"Indeed he is sir. It was also the gentleman's second wand, and I daresay his reaction was even more encouraging than your own. Not only is he powerful in his own right, but his previous wand was so ill-match, it forced him to channel more magic into his spells than should

be necessary. Now with his new wand, I believe we can expect great things from this wizard.”

“And what was that wizard’s name, Octavius?” Dumbledore asked. He’d been silent for quite some time, but the twinkling in his eye led Harry to believe he suspected the same person Harry himself did.

“Why, I believe you both know him, of course. Professor Snape, you share brother wands with Neville Longbottom.”

Harry was still laughing his head off as he exited the pensieve, and unable to control himself, Dumbledore joined him.

“Snape and Neville share wand cores!” Harry belted out. He was almost hyperventilating he was laughing so hard. “I can’t wait to tell Neville!”

“Oh my,” Dumbledore staged ignorance. “I must have left an extra memory in there after all. I had not meant for you to see that. Please do keep that last view to yourself Harry, besides Neville of course. I don’t expect you to keep such relevant information from your friend, but should the information get out, well, you can imagine how unhappy Professor Snape would be.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, still laughing. “Don’t tell anyone other than Neville. No problem.” Harry suffered though another bout of giggles. “How did Snape react after Mr. Ollivander told him that?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Well, as you can imagine, he was most displeased. He demanded to be matched with another wand, but after another half hour, resigned to the fact that there was simply no better matched wand for him to have. That still didn’t prevent him from sharing with us a few choice words I’d rather not repeat. It will be interesting to see Professor Snape’s reaction when he speaks with Neville for the first time. I’ve been watching all week, but so far they’ve stayed apart.”

“Now that he’s not taking Potions, Neville’s got no reason to be anywhere near Snape. I don’t think it’ll happen anytime soon.” Harry guessed.

"I think you'd be surprised, Harry. Professor Snape is not the type of man to ignore a coincidence of this magnitude. Out of pure curiosity, I expect him to somehow instigate a situation where he'll be forced to cross wands with your friend Neville. I showed you this memory, in part so you can tell Neville, and both be warned of the possibility. I've also showed you it so that you know, that I know, that such a thing can happen. I promise to keep Professor Snap in line, and after your past encounter with him, I hope that you'll also be willing to be on your beast behavior. An incident like what happened at Grimmauld Place need not happen again."

"I never go to Snape looking for trouble sir," Harry made clear. "If he leaves me alone, and treats my friends fairly, then I have no reason to fight with him."

"Very well Harry. That is all that I ask." Dumbledore gave Harry a look though, that clearly informed him he knew about Harry being in the Chamber of Secrets. The warning to be careful with future similar activities didn't need to be vocalized. "Finish enjoying your weekend Harry, and I'll see you soon."

Leaving Dumbledore to return the memories to his head, Harry practically ran to Gryffindor Tower, looking for Neville. Neville'd been in a surprisingly good mood during dinner; pleased with himself for the questions he'd asked the Lestranges. Harry only wondered how the new news would affect his mood.

Ron was playing chess with Ginny, and Dean and Seamus weren't around, so Harry had no problem approaching Neville and waiving him over to an abandoned corner like he'd done earlier that day. Neville wondered what was up, and put down the book he'd been reading to meet Harry.

"What's up, Harry? Where you been?"

"I've been to meet with Dumbledore," Harry told him, "and I found out some interesting news while I was there. You remember how I said I snapped Snape's wand the day I met with him at Grimmauld Place?"

"Yeah," Neville said with a smile. "You didn't get in trouble for that, did you?"

"No," Harry grinned. "I just found out about his replacement wand. It's birch, with a unicorn hair. But he's also got a brother wand, like I've got with Voldemort. And guess what Neville. The other wand belongs to you!"

Neville looked confused for a moment, then his eyes popped open in recognition. Then both boys burst out laughing, startling the whole common room. Ron looked none to happy about it, but Harry was beyond caring. The situation was so funny, neither were able to control themselves, and it was a full three hours later as the sixth year boys turned in to bed that Harry and Neville were still snickering to themselves, not believing the news. Only by practicing his Occlumency was Harry able calm down, as he planned out his activities for the next day.

He'd been meaning to do something for a long time now, and considering recent events, thought it was about time. Harry also considered Neville's success with confronting the Lestranges, and how after facing his fears, he seemed more confident and able. Harry wondered if others might react the same way, and though he'd invite a friend along with him tomorrow, if she were interested.

#### Author Notes:

So yeah, Snape huh? I've seen fics where Neville has the same wand core as Bellatrix, but I thought it'd be funnier to bash Snape a little more. Sorry, I just can't resist. Them sharing wand cores won't factor much into the rest of my story, but I'm sure we'll be seeing the brother wand effect at some point, so don't worry there. I almost considered leaving the news as a cliffhanger, but thought that after being away so long, most of you would kill me if I did.

I also want to apologize about how long it's been since my last update. As members of my Yahoo! Group know, I've had to deal with some RL issues, and I got a late start anyway on getting to work after Thanksgiving because of my foul mood from having my fic deleted.

I'm back in the saddle though, and I hope to have another chapter within two weeks, to make up for my truancy.

The Sadie Hawkins dance scene was released in my Yahoo! Group as a cookie a few weeks ago, so that shouldn't come as a surprise. I just needed to do something fun, and I think it'll be a riot turning the tables on the girls for once. None of my schools ever had such a dance, and I always hated that us guys had to ask the girls. Not that I had any problems of course.

The only other thing I can think about to discuss is that you're all probably wondering what the hell is going on with Ron, and why I left out that "worst conversation ever." Well, I can't tell you yet (that would be spoiling), but I can promise you this. Ron's jealous rant will end two chapters from now, and one of those chapters contains a flashback scene, so you'll get to see the conversation first hand. I always said I'm not a huge fan of Ron, so I therefore beat up on him a little. I do realize however that he'd Harry's friend, and I promise that they'll be best mates by the time my fic ends. Like Dumbledore said, friendships which suffer are forged stronger than ever before.

I'll be having a chat soon to discuss my fic and to let everyone yell at me for keeping the waiting so long, so please check out my Yahoo! Group for news about times and dates. I'll also update BoBS soon, and updated my ULIMATE HP FANFICTION GUIDE recently, so please check those out as well. You can find out more info on my webpage, which provides links to all my HP related sites. That's it for now, and once again, I'm sorry for taking so long.

Ross

P.S. Oh yeah. The "with great power comes great responsibility" line comes from Spiderman, which some of you may not know. So shouts out to Stan Lee. I'm not a huge fan (never read a comic in my life), but I love Kevin Smith, and god knows he talks about it enough.

## Chapter 28 – First Date

The next morning Harry woke up early, refreshed, and for the first time since returning to Hogwarts, in a good mood and looking forward to the upcoming day. Bonding with Neville the day before had done him some good, and the news about his and Snape's wand sharing brother cores still caused his lips to curl whenever he thought about it. Harry was also looking forward to his day's activities, even though he had put it off for so long. The night before he decided that since he had no other plans, it was time to further explore the Chamber of Secrets. He'd been meaning to since retrieving the basilisk fangs earlier in the year, but just kept putting it off. But after the previous day, and seeing Neville shine while keeping company with two of the men responsible for his parent's condition, Harry was also looking forward to asking someone to accompany him to the Chamber. Since Neville had held up so well against his demons, Harry knew he'd like to offer Ginny the same opportunity.

And so after his morning work out, getting showered and dressed, and after an hour so of reading an advanced Defense book (he had woken up early), Harry made his way down to breakfast to greet his friends. They had gone ahead of him, and Harry had stayed behind to grab some last minute supplies; stuff he thought might come in useful. And knowing that it was a special occasion and that she'd be welcomed, Hedwig for once rode on Harry's shoulder to catch a ride to breakfast.

“Good morning Harry,” Hermione greeted him. “And good morning Hedwig. Fancy seeing you here!” Hermione sounded cheerful as ever, and Harry supposed it was her way to deal with his and Ron’s fight. For the past half week, Hermione had been dividing her time between the two as best she could, but otherwise was spending a lot of time in the library. Harry didn’t blame her, really. He knew it was hard to be caught in the middle, as they’d already had a talk about it the last time Ron had gotten jealous back in their fourth year. And even since then, Harry and Ron had had their share of smaller arguments, with both boys to blame, that she’d likewise stayed out of. Fortunately for her though, those had always lasted less than a day, and had never been so serious. Harry’s current argument was.

"Morning Hermione. Ginny, Neville," Harry paused a moment, and then decided to add on, "Ron." Just because the two were fighting, didn't mean he had to be a jerk. He promised himself he'd stay at least friendly with Ron even though they weren't getting along. It was the least he could do. It would also hopefully make it easier for Ron to approach him and apologize when he saw the errors in his way and worked up the nerve.

After McGonagall's speech, Harry had considered compromising himself to appease Ron, but after only a moment of thought, put that out of his mind. What had he done wrong, after all? Invited Neville to spend the holidays with him, when otherwise he would have been forced to stay at Hogwarts alone? Not a chance! Besides, how many times had Harry been invited to the Burrow, for just that same reason? Ron was being hypocritical, and everybody knew it. What else could Harry apologize for? Distributing some money like Sirius instructed in his will? Getting his friends thoughtful and appropriate Christmas gifts? It's not like he could walk up to Ron and say, 'Sorry for being more sensitive than you. Give me my money back, I promise never to speak to Neville again, and let's you and me go back to being mates!' Yeah, fat chance of that.

Neville and the girls both greeted him back, but Ron merely grunted and went back to the serving dish for another helping of waffles. Harry just sighed, and fixed his own plate. Apparently, Ron wasn't ready yet.

"So Harry," Ginny wondered, "what is Hedwig doing down here at breakfast? I thought she wasn't allowed in the Great Hall?"

That was a common misconception because some rumor had spread, and Harry had no reason to stop it. It wasn't correct though. "No," he answered, "she's allowed; Dumbledore and I just decided that she caused too much distraction, and I agreed to keep her appearances to a minimum. You know she still delivers some mail for me, and visits occasionally. Today is just one of those days. I've got plans for this morning, and I think she'll be with me for them. We're just making a full day of it, I guess."

"What plans? Don't forget Harry, we've got to meet with Hagrid for tea later. You haven't seen him since we've gotten back."

Harry reassured Hermione that he hadn't forgotten. That wasn't until the afternoon anyway, and hopefully exploring the Chamber wouldn't take more than a few hours.

"I've just got something to do that I've put off for awhile. Nothing interesting, really," Harry lied. Seeing an opportunity though, Harry casually worked in his offer. "Do you have plans for today Ginny? I was wondering if you're free to help me?"

Ginny looked surprised to be singled out, and was caught off guard. "Why me?"

"Oh, sorry," Harry explained. He didn't want to mention the real reason (as it probably broke at least thirty school rules), so he just made something up that the others would believe. Homework always worked, and there was only one class that he and Ginny shared exclusively.

"I've got a problem with an Arithmancy equation, and was wondering if you'd help me. I'd ask you Hermione, but you're way ahead of me, and would probably solve the thing in just a few minutes. I kind of want to work the problem out for myself. And seeing how Ginny's in my Arithmancy class. Well, you see. You can check up on my work though, when I'm finished. How about that?"

"That's fine Harry," Hermione agreed. He caught a small smile though that she tried to hide. "You're probably right too. Just starting the subject this year, you probably couldn't keep up with my pace. After all, I am a know-it-all!" Harry and the others laughed a little, except Ron. It was nice to see Hermione subject herself to a little self deprecating humor. It softened her image some, which never hurt anyone. At least she knew her faults.

"So how about it, Gin? We'll be done in plenty of time for Hagrid's, and maybe we could even get in some Quidditch planning afterwards. Practice starts up again next week, and I've got some more ideas on how we can change our strategies."

Quidditch was the cincher for Ginny, and she quickly agreed. At first she complained about her OWLs fast approaching, but everyone at the table knew that perhaps with the exception of certain Ravenclaws, she was the most prepared fifth year student in the school. Harry, Hermione, and Neville's tutoring had done wonders for her and Luna, and even though she still had to study more than ever before, she wasn't about to break down from the stress like some of Harry's classmates had the year before.

After that, normal breakfast conversation continued as Harry kept mostly quite while eating, trying to catch up to the others. The only bad news was an article in the Sunday Daily Prophet about another Death Eater attack. It was the first since Christmas Day, and luckily nobody was killed. A few people were injured, but still managed to portkey away before any serious damage was inflicted. It made the front page though, because Death Eaters were captured from the scene of the crime. It seemed one especially brave witch put up anti-apparition wards before she portkeyed out, to hold the Death Eaters in her home. Moments later when the aurors arrived on scene, they weren't too late for once, and managed to nab three of the five Death Eaters before the wards were broken down. Three out of all of Voldemort's men weren't a lot (especially compared with the fifteen in Harry's trunk), but it was a start, and a huge boost for the magical community's moral, not to mention great praise for the new portkeys and regulations created under Minister Bones's administration. There were the usual Dementor attacks on muggles as well (another seventeen victims rendered soulless in a week), but that wasn't any new news, and the article only appeared on page nine.

It was while Harry was sipping the last of his tea, after he pushed away his plate, that he was finally approached by the first girl. He'd been in a good mood all morning long, and apparently it hadn't gone unnoticed by the school's population. Especially the female population; the ones who needed to find a date before the Valentine's Day Dance arrived.

"Hi Harry," a pretty seventh year Gryffindor interrupted his thoughts, "mind if I sit down and join you for awhile?" She was one of the girls

Harry occasionally spied on late at night with his x-ray lens, and the fact that he was actually having a conversation with her startled him.

"Um, no," Harry searched his mind for a name, "Cathy." He hoped that was it. And apparently it was, because she plopped down with a smile. Harry had plenty of space to his right, so it wasn't like he could refuse her and be polite about it. Still, he hadn't yet put two and two together and realized what she was talking to him for. He was just trying to keep from embarrassing himself.

"Thanks," she said, picking up a slice of bacon from his discarded plate and nibbling on it. "You look to be in a better mood this morning."

"Uh yeah, I am, thanks," he said. Harry was trying real hard to keep from watching her suggestively nibble on the bacon strip, and it hadn't gone unnoticed by his friends. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Hermione, Ginny, Dean, Neville, Natalie, and even Ron hold back their laughter. "I had a good sleep last night." It was all he could think to say.

"Well," she finished her bacon, licking her fingers, "that's good. You looked grumpy the past few days, which is why I haven't approached before. Anyway, you know that dance Professor Dumbledore mentioned? The Sadie Hawkins thing? What do you think of it? The idea I mean; girls asking guys out and all that. My parents aren't muggles, so I hadn't heard of it before."

Harry didn't know what she was getting at. Surely she had found out about the dance in the past few days from someone else? It was all anybody could stand to talk about lately! And why was she asking Harry; someone who she'd only said a passing greeting to before? Clearly, Harry was slow on the uptake.

"Ah, it's a nice idea I guess. I'd only heard about them before, but the tradition had been around for awhile. Mainly an American thing though, I thought. I didn't know it got started by a wizard though. Still, nothing wrong with girls having to ask for dates for a change. I only wish the Yule Ball two years ago had been like that. I got real embarrassed when I had to ask someone out."

"Oh, that's right, you did, didn't you! I remember now. Cho's in some of my classes, and her friends were all giggling about it one day after you asked her. I nearly forgot about that!" Cathy was talking like nothing was the matter, but everyone else saw Harry turn beet red, and again had to purposely look away to keep from laughing.

"Anyways," Cathy went on, not noticing Harry's discomfort at all. "I'm glad you're okay with the idea of girls asking boys out, because I wanted to invite you to the dance. I broke up with my boyfriend this summer, and I'm not interested in any other seventh year boys. You're cute though. So, what do you say?"

Harry was still beet red, but now his mouth dropped open as well. Later his friends would all tell him they all saw the question coming, but it had approached Harry with stealth and cunning, and caught him completely by surprise. Luckily, a good friend came to the rescue.

"Sorry Cathy, but he's already been asked." Cathy upon hearing the answer immediately looked thoughtful, and then slightly upset. Little did Harry know, she's been watching his mood ever since the dance was announced, and thought she had been the first to reach him. Over the past few months she'd caught him staring at her when he thought she hadn't noticed, and thought he might be interested. If only she knew that Harry was more interested in her underwear than in dating her, she could have saved herself a lot of trouble.

"Is that so, Harry?" Cathy asked, not wanting to believe the answer.

Harry looked to his savior, saw her nodding her head, and nodded his head to agree. "Er, yeah Cathy, sorry. I've already been asked. Thanks for the invite though. I'm sure it would have been fun." That seemed to pacify her some, and after some forced small talk so that neither seemed obvious, Cathy made her way back to her normal seat.

"Thanks Ginny, I owe you one," Harry thanked his savior from across the table. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Oh really Harry," Hermione chided him. "We all saw that coming a mile away. Even Connie noticed, and she's only a third year."

Harry stared dumbstruck at little Connie Wood, who couldn't help but giggle and nod her head. Everyone around them laughed, and even Harry found some humor in him being so completely oblivious.

"No more laughing at me," he mock threatened. "Next time you laugh Connie, that's extra laps around the pitch during practice!" Of course that only caused more laughter, which even Harry couldn't control. Until Ron went and had to spoil the mood.

"So you're dating my sister now, are you?" His voice was calm and unemotional, which was perhaps more dangerous for Ron than if he'd been screaming.

"Oh Ron, honestly!" Hermione wagged her finger at him. "A single dance doesn't constitute that two people are dating. Did you date Padma after the Yule Ball? No! Besides, Ginny only said that so Harry'd have an excuse to turn Cathy down. You men are so thick sometimes!"

"Why is it that I'm always thick, huh? And why should Ginny even care about Harry's social life anyway?

"Because Ron," Ginny answered, "it's obvious that Harry wasn't interested, and if you weren't such a prat around him lately, you would have noticed that. I was only helping a friend. Besides, I never said I had asked him to the dance, I only said that he had been asked. I never even said that he'd accepted, so technically it's not a lie. It's misleading enough to send her away, and yet Harry could have still agreed if he wanted to. At least Harry knows that now he's not being a sourpuss anymore, more and more girls are going to approach him. He's going to have to deal with them at some point. Now he knows what he can say if he wants to turn them away. And since when do you get to butt into my social life? I thought you learned your lesson with that joke we played on you with Dean? I'm going to the dance with someone, and you're just going to have to accept it."

Ron growled almost, he was so displeased. "Well, it doesn't mean I have to like it! And I don't care what Mum says. If whoever you end up going with doesn't treat you right, I'm going to have words with him."

"Awww," Hermione cooed sarcastically, "that's so sweet, and yet still so overprotective of you. I think you should worry about finding your own date, Ron. That goes for you too, Dean and Seamus. Between me, Lav, and Parvati, there's only three of us to the five of you boys. That means at least two of you will have to find dates from girls in other houses, or other years. And that's even assuming that all three of us will ask any of you out. That's not likely to happen, with the way you've been acting."

"What's wrong with how we've been acting?" Seamus protested.

"Well," Hermione explained with a huff, "Ron's been all moody and unpleasant around certain people." She paused dramatically to look at Harry, but it wasn't needed. "And all of you have been spending more time talking sports than even noticing us girls. Lavender came back from vacation with a new haircut, but did any of you notice it? No!"

"She got a new haircut?" Harry asked. He thought himself observant, and even he hadn't noticed.

"Harry! She lost nearly three inches in length!" Hermione must have thought that was a lot from the way she reacted. But only three inches when her hair was all the way down to her waist? Harry didn't think that could be considered a haircut. A trim, more like it.

"Anyway," Hermione continued, "if you want a girl to ask you out, you've got to start being nicer towards them. There's six weeks until the dance, so take some advice, and be on your best behavior if you want to find a date. That's the last warning you'll get from me."

"So if we start noticing new haircuts and stuff like that, girls would be more likely to ask us out?" Ron asked.

"Maybe," Hermione answered flirtingly. "The point is, it can't hurt. And unless you want to go to the dance with just anyone, you've got to start being on your best behavior."

All the guys nodded and returned to their meals, but Harry noticed something else as well. Ron looked to take Hermione's information to heart, where normally he would have dismissed it until she started to repeat herself. Harry wondered why, and wondered if Hermione picked up on it as well. Did she even realize that Ron fancied her yet? And how did she feel towards him? Only time would tell, and Harry figured at least the dance was good for something. One way or the other, he'd find out by Valentine's Day.

Breakfast soon ended, with Ron going off with Dean and Seamus to kick a football around in the courtyard, where heating charms prevented any snow to accumulate, and allowed the students some outdoor activity when the grounds were otherwise too cold. Harry and the others headed back to Gryffindor Tower, but he fell to the back of the group, and was sure to bring Ginny along with him. Once the two were paces behind the rest, Harry motioned with his finger to be silent, and led her away through a secret passage that led back down to the fourth floor.

"Harry! What are you doing," she asked.

"Sorry Ginny, I just didn't want the others to see where we snuck off to. Let's find someplace private, and I'll explain it to you." Ginny wanted to know a bit more than that, but was waved off by Harry as he brought out his Marauder's Map, and activated it. Using his x-ray lens to look around the nearest corners, Harry had spotted Draco Malfoy hiding behind a large tapestry. Knowing from Lestrange's interrogation that Draco was spying on him, and leaking information to his father, Harry wanted to be sure that he wasn't followed when he didn't want to be. Using the Marauder's Map just insured that Harry missed nothing. It was a good thing he used it too, because Pansy Parkinson's name was in another close-by corridor, in the opposite direction of Draco. Harry would have to pass one of the two to get off the fourth floor, and was glad he stayed behind to grab some things before breakfast.

"Malfoy's watching us," Harry told Ginny, pointing to the map. "He's trying to spy on me, and write back to his dad. Let's get past him, and then I'll explain." Ginny nodded her head in understanding, and moments later Harry had cleared and stowed the map, and brought out his other prized possession. It had been a long time since he's snuck around under his Invisibility Cloak with another person, but with only him and Ginny, it was just barely large enough to cover them both.

Ginny had only seen the cloak; never used it before; and therefore was perhaps too eager to jump under it with Harry. Either way, it got them past Draco without him noticing, and soon Harry had Ginny alone in an empty second floor classroom.

"Sorry about that," Harry apologized, "but Draco's a little sneak. It was because of him telling his dad that Death Eaters attacked me and Neville at St. Mungo's over the holidays. He's been spying on me so much lately. Usually I pretend like I don't notice, but when I want to, I can usually give him the slip."

"Good thing you've got your map then," Ginny commented. "But why'd you have your cloak on you? And what sort of 'plans' do you really have for today. Needing my help with Arithmancy is a load of bull! You could probably show Hermione a thing or two, and we both know it. What's really going on, Harry?"

"Well, it's like this." Harry didn't know quite how to ask if Ginny would like to help him explore the Chamber where she'd almost died four years ago, so he just said it. "I was in the Chamber of Secrets earlier this year, and I noticed there was more to it than I previously thought. I've been meaning to go back down there to look around, and thought you might like to come with me. I know I'd sure appreciate the company. Hedwig's great and all, but some human companionship would be even better."

Ginny looked at Harry like he'd gone crazy, and slowly she repeated the question. "You want me to go down into the Chamber of Secrets with you, just so you can have a look around? The Chamber of Secrets, where a giant snake lived, and where I almost died?"

"Well," Harry sheepishly said, "it sounds bad when you put it like that, but I thought you might like to come?"

"Why for Circe's sake would you think that?" Ginny harshly whispered. "You're not too bright sometimes Harry! Even Ron's not as thick as this!"

"It's not like that," Harry argued, a little angry. "I'm going down for sure, and I just thought you'd like the opportunity to go down with me. Face your fears, and all that. If you're hesitating about going down there, it means you're still bothered by what happened. The snake's dead, the diary's destroyed, and all that's left is a big empty room. I thought that by going down with me and seeing for yourself, you might feel a little better."

"Why would you think that?" Ginny asked, this time with more patience.

"Well, yesterday I had a long talk with Neville about his parents and their condition, and I think it did him some good to talk about it. I can't tell you everything, because it's personal, but even though he faced some scary memories, by facing them and talking about them, I think he's more comfortable with what happened now. As I was doing my Occlumency exercises last night, I was already planning on going into the Chamber, and thought you might react the same way. Of course I know it's hard, and maybe frightening for you. But by going down and seeing that there's nothing to be afraid of, I thought you might get something out of the experience like Neville did. I'm not forcing you down there or anything; I was only offering."

"You're damn straight, you're not forcing me down there! If you even tried to, my Bat Boogey Hex would be the least of your worries." Ginny paused then, and chewed on her lip like Harry noticed she did while working Arithmancy problems. "I don't know though Harry. I had a lot of bad dreams after all that happened. Now I just try to forget about it. I'm not sure going back down would be the best thing for me."

"That's why I'm only offering," Harry reassured her. "I am going down, and so is Hedwig. I promise you'll be perfectly safe, and Hedwig can get you out at anytime. So if you want to come, only for a little while even, I still think it might do you some good." Ginny was considering his words, he knew.

"I can leave at anytime I want," she asked.

"Yes."

"And Hedwig will be with us?"

"Yes."

"And Professor Dumbledore knows about this?"

With that one, Harry cringed. "Er, not exactly, no. But he does know I've been down before, and he hasn't said anything. And as I'm the only Parseltongue in school, it's not like we'd be in much danger down there. I just figure that Salazar Slytherin must have built that chamber for something besides just housing a giant snake. Think how long it must have taken to dig out without the other founders finding out about it. I just want to look around, is all. If we find anything dangerous or important, we can tell Dumbledore then."

Ginny was smiling though. "Relax Harry, I was just teasing you. There's no way in hell Dumbledore would ever let us go down there alone; I knew that he didn't know. You're just lucky I've a bit of Weasley mischief in me. Okay, so when do we go?"

With no time like the present, Harry lead her straight to Myrtle's bathroom, and approached the sink he knew hid the Chamber's entrance. Fortunately Myrtle was nowhere to be found (probably spying on the prefects in their bathroom), and Harry was able to coax the sink open without much hassle. Just like before, with the barest of commands, his Parseltongue made the job easy. But the sink wasn't the only thing to hear his command.

"How can I open, Harry?" Seth asked.

"Er, sorry Seth," Harry apologized. "Thisss time I wasn't talking to you. We're about to enter a secret Chamber that'sss protected by Parseltongue passwordsss. Remember I told you about it? I'm just going down for a closer look. Come to think of it, I might have some questionsss for you once I get down there."

"Very well friend Harry. I will await your inquiriesss."

Ginny had occasionally heard Harry speak to Seth before, but that was always in the common room, when he was working on his notes. Wondering what the ring had said, she asked.

"Oh," Harry said, "Seth was just wondering why I told him to open up." Ginny giggled nervously. "I told him I'm going back down, and I might ask him some questions if we find anything. Sometimes I forget that Seth's been around at least as long as Hogwarts has, and I often don't take advantage of his knowledge. It's a mistake I've made too many times before. Now with the common theme of Parseltongue and dark wizards, I want to make sure I ask him everything that I can."

"Dark wizards," Ginny asked. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Ginny," Harry rolled his eyes. "We're about to enter the secret chamber of one of history's darkest wizards, and Seth himself was created by a dark wizard, and lived as that wizard's companion. I think he might have some insight."

"It's wasn't Slytherin, was it?"

"No," Harry smiled. "I thought that too at first, but from what I can tell, Seth's never been to Hogwarts before, and his old master died long before Hogwarts was created. Salazar wasn't even born then. It's possible Seth's old master was an ancestor or something I suppose, but it wasn't the Slytherin we know."

Ginny nodded, and turned back to face the gapping hole in the floor. Harry realized that as interesting as Seth was, all they were really doing was postponing having to slide down that dank hole.

"Um, do you want me to go first?" Harry asked softly. "That way I could catch you at the bottom."

Ginny shook her head. "If you went first, I'm not sure I'd convince myself to follow you." Harry could tell she was real nervous, and was trying to gather her courage.

"There's nothing down there that can hurt you, Ginny."

She didn't even look his way to answer. "I know, but it's still difficult."

Harry gave her a few more moments in silence to compose herself, and then decided to give her some help. Quietly whispering to Hedwig, Harry convinced his former pet to fly to Ginny's shoulder, and sing her song. The tune helped, and after Ginny gave Harry a thankful smile, she took a deep breath and slid down the slide. It was only a few seconds later that he heard her shrieking in terror.

"Ginny!" Harry called out to her. No answer.

"Ginny," he tried again. The direction and acoustics of the pipe though directed sound up, not down, so all Harry heard was more of the same screaming, and no answer to his call. Not knowing what else to do, Harry pointed his already drawn wand in front of him, and took to the slide himself.

It was much like he remembered a few years ago, except this time Harry was trying desperately to sit up properly, and keep his wand aimed forward. Should he come across trouble (Ginny had stopped yelling), he wanted to be ready for action.

After what seemed like an eternity later, Harry reached the bottom of the pipe, and breathed in silent relief as he welcomed a healthy and unharmed Ginny. She looked very upset, but otherwise alright, and Harry sheathed his wand as his temper got momentarily out of hand.

"What did you go and scream for?" He asked shortly. "I thought the pipe had broken and you had dropped off or something; screaming like a mad woman!"

"Well excuse me for yelling," she answered back, just as hotly. "But these are the first brand new robes I've ever owned in my entire life, and I wasn't expecting to slide through three inches of nasty muck to get down here! My outfit is just ruined now, no thanks to you. We should have changed first before sliding down that!"

'She's screaming because she got dirty?' Harry wondered to himself. 'Unbelievable!' It was kind of funny though. Harry had gotten plenty dirty too, but not as bad as Ginny because she was first down the slide. She'd clearly gotten the worse of it, because Harry could hardly tell what color her robes were in the dim light of his wand. When Harry had visited the Chamber earlier in the year, he had used Hedwig and avoided the slide. What Ginny had just slid through was at least three years of accumulated dirt, mold, excrement, and who knows what else.

"Sorry," Harry muttered. "But next time, do you mind only shrieking when you're in danger or something? Scourgify."

Harry didn't even wait for Ginny's response before casting a cleaning charm on his own robes. It didn't do much good except to get the excess muck off him though. Unlike when the charm was used to remove soot from a fireplace, or clean up spilled drinks or ink, the muck Harry slid through had worked its way into the fabric of his robe. Dobby and Winky would have trouble getting this robe clean again. And Ginny encountered much of the same problem when she cast her own charm on herself. She stayed even dirtier, but was wise enough not to comment on it. She was starting to feel slightly embarrassed for screaming so loudly.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I guess I'm just nervous about being down here, and I overreacted. I promise not to scream again unless I'm in mortal peril."

Harry had to laugh. "Good; that's the way it should be. Only mortal peril deserves a shriek like you gave out. Dirty robes only rate an 'aw shucks' at best."

"But these were brand new robes! My first ever! I'd almost rather be in mortal peril again, than ruin these robes. At least I know you can

defend yourself, should you have to. I doubt you know diddly about doing laundry though. Or girls, for that matter.”

“Oh,” Harry said, momentarily thinking she was serious. “Is this anything like not noticing Lavender had a haircut?”

“Yes, it is,” Ginny said sternly. “This rates above that though in terms of importance, only slightly below getting a zit on your nose before a date.”

“Getting a zit?” Harry couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

This time, Ginny couldn’t keep her straight face. She laughed, and once again Harry realized he was being more gullible than your average first year.

Before they knew it, both teens had stopped laughing, for they had approached the second door in the tunnel. Harry only vaguely remembered passing the large snakeskin and the cave-in, he was so focused on trying not to further upset Ginny. It looked like whether they had meant to or not, the diversionary tactic of talking had gotten them fairly deep within the tunnel.

“Are those snakes ensouled, like Seth, or just animated,” Ginny asked of the five snakes bronzed onto the large circular door.

“Just animated I think,” Harry answered. “If they were ensouled, they would have said something by now. This is my third trip past the door, and they’ve never tried to talk back. How about you? Do you remember them ever talking to you when you came down here?”

Ginny looked quite nervous, but shook her head no. “No. At least, I don’t think so. I don’t much remember ever being down here, except for when me, you, Ron, and Professor Lockhart all rode Fawkes out. Most of it is just like a bad dream. I remember bits and pieces, but it’s hard to separate what really happened, to what only happened in my nightmares. It was like my body was doing things; even speaking Parseltongue; but I had no control over it, and don’t remember most

of it. They could have talked to me, I suppose, but not me really. It would have been..." Ginny faltered.

"Tom," Harry said quietly. He was impressed that Ginny had said so much about her experience. He knew that even though it had been nearly four years, Ginny really hadn't talked about being possessed with anyone. It was more just accepted that it had happened, and buried in the past. Ginny had spoken a little to him the previous year about it when he was feeling down on himself, but nothing about any of the details. Harry knew it had taken a lot for Ginny to even admit that much. Maybe bringing her down into the Chamber really was a good idea.

"We don't have to talk about it Gin, but I know how you feel. Some of the dreams I've had are sort of the same. It's like I'm there in his mind, and when I wake up, I only remember flashes and vague recollections. I recall them all perfectly now that I study Occlumency, but before then, it was always uncertain."

Ginny just nodded, but said no more. Not wanting to push his luck, Harry just instructed the door to open, and made to climb down the ladder. He tried to make a small joke about going first to clear off the grime, but it fell flat. Still, Ginny allowed Harry to enter the lower chamber first, and by the time she had followed, Harry already had cleaned himself off, and had his wand lit. In the vast cavern, it wasn't much, but it was appreciated all the same.

"Harry, I...I don't know if I can do this," Ginny said, scared.

Harry moved as close to her as possible, to bathe her in light. Hedwig had appeared on his shoulder, and was softly singing her song. Still, it didn't do much to calm Ginny.

"It's okay Ginny. The hardest part's over with, and Hedwig and I are right here. Anytime you want she can bring you back to your dorm room. It'll only take a second, so you have nothing to worry about. Alright?"

Ginny swallowed nervously, but nodded. Harry admired her for confronting such a scary part of her past, and wondered what was

going through her mind. Could Harry do this, if he were in her place? Could he, for example, revisit the graveyard where Voldemort was resurrected using his blood, and not be just as scared? Harry thought he might be able to, but only because he'd faced a lot more tougher situations than Ginny. He'd had a harder life, and it was times like this when that fact was a benefit.

Each with their wands lit now, the two slowly moved down the central isle towards where they knew the large bust of Salazar Slytherin stood. There were about two dozen statuesque columns on either side of them lined up like an honor guard, and Harry remembered that four years before, there had been torches on top of each that had lit the entire room. Earlier in the year he hadn't remembered or bothered, as he'd only come down to collect the basilisk ingredients. Now that he was here to explore though, and had brought Ginny with him, Harry thought it might be a good idea to find a way to light the fires. Ginny must have done it long ago, but it was probably one of the things she'd only done as instructed by Tom, and didn't remember. Not wanting to bring it up, Harry kept quiet, and walked to the far side of a nearby column to look for fire access. Using his wand like a penlight, he looked for some sort of marking, or instruction.

It wasn't a moment later that Harry heard Ginny scream out again; but this time it was in sheer panic. She was calling his name; not being able to find him; and Harry could have slapped himself for stepping out of Ginny's line of vision without warning her.

"Ginny, I'm right here," Harry said while running to her. She was only three columns away; perhaps twenty feet; but was clearly upset. "I'm sorry, I was looking for a way to light the torches, and I stepped away for a second. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Harry expected her to yell at him some more, for being so foolish and inconsiderate. But instead, what she did surprised and slightly alarmed him. With tears running down her face, Ginny rushed towards him and threw her arms around his torso, grabbing on for dear life. Not knowing what else to do, but knowing she needed comforting, Harry slowly placed his arms around Ginny as well, and rocked her until she had calmed some.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled into his shoulder. "I turned around, and I couldn't see you, and I got so scared all of the sudden. And then I called out, and dropped my wand, and everything got dark, and I froze. You must think I'm being stupid."

"No," Harry told her, momentarily pushing her away so he could look her in her face. "I was being stupid for leaving you alone without telling you. I didn't realize you could react like that, and I'm sorry. I know this is hard for you, but I guess I didn't realize how hard until just now. Let's get your wand, and then I'll bring you back to Gryffindor Tower. I can come back alone later, but I think you've had enough for one day."

Ginny made as if to say something, but was cut off as Harry canceled his Lumos spell, and intoned "Accio Ginny's wand!"

A small whooshing sound could be heard as it flew through the air, and somehow, although Ginny couldn't guess, Harry caught the wand deftly in his hand. His magical lens allowed him to see better in the dark than normal, and although he couldn't make out much beyond two or three feet, he could see the incoming wand clear enough. Not a second later, Harry had lit up his wand again, knowing that Ginny needed the light. They'd only been in the dark for less than five seconds, but already Ginny was again shaking, and had moved back to grasp Harry as tightly as she could. Harry rocked her again for another moment before pulling away and presenting her with her wand.

"Loose something?"

Ginny snorted and snatched away her wand, clearly not amused with his lame attempt at humor.

"Sorry," Harry mumbled. Looking around for his dedicated companion, Harry found Hedwig perched at the top of an outcropping in the rock formation, and he motioned her over.

"No, Harry, that's alright," Ginny said, surprising him. "I had a scare, but I'm not ready to give up yet. You're right, and I'm just being silly."

"Are you sure Ginny," Harry replied. "No one would blame you for wanting to get out of here. Hell! If I was you, I'd want to get out of here."

Mustering all her resolve, she nodded her head. "I'm positive." Then looking a little more like the scared teen she'd just been leaching on to him, she whispered. "Just don't leave me alone again, alright?"

Harry smiled. As if he would! "Okay." To prove his point, Harry reached out to offer his hand (it was meant to be a joke; like saying she needed to before crossing the street), and surprisingly she took it.

For the next half hour, Harry and Ginny wondered all along the walls of the main Chamber, holding each other's hands, while looking for clues or anything useful. Ginny became more comfortable with the location, and Harry became more comfortable with the physical contact, and by the time the first half hour was up, the two were moving twice as fast through the Chamber as when they'd first started.

Not wanting to spend the whole day down there, Harry then insisted that they somehow get the torches lit. He didn't know how to do it magically (the ones at Hogwarts always lit automatically, and his house was electric), but by levitating Ginny ten feet in the air, she had a clear shot to light each torch individually with an *Incendio* spell. After that, the Chamber became much less scary, and much more bright. Still though, each time Ginny was lowered down to the ground, she retook Harry's hand, and he didn't complain in the least.

The tunnels the basilisk had used to navigate the plumbing were next to be explored, and seeing one too many tomb raider movies where the archeologist's assistants always got lost in the mazes, Harry knew right away to mark the tunnels and turn-offs he'd seen as soon as he used them. Wanting to distract Ginny, he asked her to take responsibility for it while he studied the pathways, and so therefore it became her job to mark the walls as they furthered their expedition. The charm was the same one Hermione had used to mark an "X" on the doors in the Department of Mysteries, and wasn't that hard to do.

Harry had only taken a few of those tunnels years ago when he was escaping the basilisk, and he now discovered those were only the larger ones. The snake had grown too large for the many smaller tunnels Harry found, although he supposed when the basilisk was younger, it used them as well.

But most of the tunnels they found were dead ends. Dead ends, or loops that ran in circles. Even the multiple forks in the roads led nowhere specific, and eventually led them back to familiar ground. The system of tunnels just seemed to be one large network of paths, all designed to let the basilisk get from one point to the next, any multitude of ways. Harry didn't see the purpose, but Ginny had no problem.

"Harry. We must be several hundred feet above the main chamber by now! I bet we're even almost at the level of Hogwarts. For some reason, these tunnels were made to let the basilisk have access to Hogwarts."

Turning behind him to look at the steep decline of the tunnel he'd just climbed, Harry realized with a start that she was correct. It also made sense as well, taking into consideration another fact he'd forgotten until then. Back when the basilisk was making its attacks on muggleborns, Harry at the time swore he heard a voice in the walls; a voice that no one else had heard. He knew the basilisk was the cause, and Hermione had confirmed its mode of travel in the pipes of the school, but so far Harry hadn't seen a single entrance or exit besides the main one which had been locked.

"I know what they're for," Harry told Ginny upon his revelation. "The basilisk traveled these pipes, moving throughout the school, so he could get a fix on where certain students were. It must have had some base intelligence to be able to speak and follow direction to attack only certain people, so it must have stalked the students like prey, before it attacked." Following a hunch, Harry turned to the nearest wall and concentrated on looking though it. At first he thought he was wrong, but after about thirty feet of stone, Harry made out a narrow hallway that clearly resembled a corridor on the third floor of Hogwart's castle.

"See," Harry yelled, excited and pointing. "We're right next to the Defense corridor on the third floor. The basilisk must have been able to see through the walls, or maybe smell through them. It kept an eye on the school, but could only attack once someone let it out through the main entrance. Slytherin must have planned these tunnels even before Hogwarts was built. Maybe not to be included with his Chamber of Secrets at the time, but he must have had something planned for them eventually. There's no way it's coincidence these tunnels burrow through solid rock where there easily could have been more hallways, or extra classrooms. Why, without all the dead space these tunnels take up, Hogwarts could probably have taken up only half the space as it actually does. I wonder why nobody's noticed this before?"

"Harry," Ginny said after a moment. "What you said makes sense, and I believe you and all, but how do you know we're near the Defense corridor? There's no way you could know that, even if you used a location spell. We've been so twisted and turned around, we could be halfway to Hogsmeade and not even know it."

Oops! Harry hadn't meant to give away his little secret, but supposed it was too late to take it back now. He could have obliviated Ginny, he supposed, but that was not only illegal, but also immoral, and he couldn't even consider doing that to a friend. Why, if he was willing to do that, he would have obliviated Ron long ago about his jealousy, and happily put an end to their fight.

"You remember those contact lenses I mentioned at the beginning of the school year," Harry reminded her. "Well, I got a few more options on them besides just the ones to correct my vision. Besides being weather proof and indestructible, I can also see better in the dark than normal, and I can see through solid objects like Moody's magical eye can, if I concentrate. That's how I know where we are. I can actually see the corridor about thirty feet past this wall."

"You can see through solid rock?" Ginny asked, amazed.

"I can see through pretty much anything," Harry answered. Trying his hand at humor again, he looked Ginny up and down, and said, "For instance, you have pink underwear on."

Ginny looked confused for a moment, and then horrified.

“Harry!” She shrieked.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Jeez, no sense of humor! Didn’t you ever see Superman?”

“What?” Ginny asked, but he could tell she was still upset.

“It’s a muggle movie; one of the few I’ve seen, that has a guy who can see through solid objects, among other abilities. He’s interviewed by a reporter, and to test his ability, she asks him what color underwear she’s wearing. The answer is pink, so that’s why I said that. I didn’t really look.”

“Well,” she sounded more forgiving, “I would hope not. And I believe you, because I’m wearing blue. You just shocked me, is all. Don’t do that again. You can’t go around using muggle references that none of us will get.”

“Ask Hermione about it later,” Harry suggested. “She’ll tell you more about it, if you want. Anyway, why don’t we get back down to the main chamber? Now that we know what these tunnels are for, I don’t think we need to explore any more of them.”

“Sounds good,” Ginny agreed, and took his hand as they carefully made their way back. The entire time she kept glancing at Harry’s eyes; no doubt to make sure he wasn’t looking at her. Or more specifically at what she was wearing. It was a good thing she was keeping him on his toes as well, or else he might have peeked. Ever since Ginny had let slip that she was wearing blue underwear, he got curious as to whether she was telling the truth or not. It took every ounce of willpower he had to prevent from breaking his own rules, and take a look.

Back in the main chamber once more, Harry used a freezing charm on the small pool of water to ice it over. The basilisk had come out of Slytherin’s mouth, he remembered, and Ginny had also mentioned that looking in there might be a smart idea. She wasn’t wrong.

The mouth opened up when Harry commanded it to in Parseltongue, and it took some teamwork to climb up into the opening. Once they did though, they immediately found themselves in a small room with sparse furniture. The stone throne and table looked much like what Voldemort favored in Harry's visions, but fifty years ago when he had been but a student, Harry doubted he had gone through the trouble of creating such detailed works. Most likely, they had been left over from Slytherin, over a millennium ago.

"This must have been a private office or library at one point," Ginny commented, noticing not only the table and throne, but also crumbling old bookshelves and a few scraps of rotting parchment.

"That's what I figure," Harry agreed. "And if Slytherin left his Chamber for his future heirs to be able to access, I bet this place was pretty stocked when Voldemort first discovered it. Makes sense, if you think about it."

"How's that," Ginny asked.

"Well," Harry explained. "Tom Riddle lived in a muggle orphanage when he wasn't at Hogwarts, so it's not like he had exposure to the magical world then. And when he was here at Hogwarts, he wasn't exactly learning about the Dark Arts in classes. Not even the Restricted Section has books that contain spells like the ones Voldemort likes to use, and that's even assuming he had unlimited access, which I doubt. So he must have learned some Dark Arts from somewhere, at least before he graduated. Well, when he opened the Chamber for the first time, he must have found this room, and I bet those bookshelves weren't so empty then. I bet Voldemort had access to some real rare texts and Slytherin's private journals. He probably still has them. I bet that's part of how he became so powerful, and almost immortal, so quickly."

Ginny shuddered at the thought, but she knew Harry was right. The place was completely empty now, and Voldemort most likely had done it. She only hoped some of the books had been rotted and decomposed when he had found them, and proved useless. She knew it wasn't likely, though. A wizard as powerful and esteemed as

Salazar Slytherin would surely place protective spells on any books he left behind.

After a quick conversation with Seth in which Harry asked if there might be anything he could add (and there wasn't), Harry and Ginny moved hand in hand down the remaining tunnel that the statue's open mouth had exposed. The small room had only been a small alcove off the larger tunnel, and unlike all the other tunnels they had visited, this one was sloping fast downward.

It also didn't branch off, or turn, or even narrow. Instead it just continued forward, sloping down nearly as far as some of the other tunnels had sloped up. After a solid twenty minutes walking, Harry was getting excited that he'd found something, and a drip on his shoulder led him to believe that he was right.

"Ginny," Harry said, pointing towards the roof, "look."

"It's water," she said, non-impressed, "so what?" Hedwig on her shoulder (who'd been there since they managed to light the main room's torches) was being dripped on as well, and wasn't liking it one bit. Perhaps it was because Ginny was sensing her discomfort, that she didn't recognize the water for the clue that it was.

"Don't you see? It's water, and it's leaking though stone. Normal moisture in the earth wouldn't do that. It takes a lot of pressure to seep though solid stone like that. That's why we've been sloping down for so long, and why it's so dank all of the sudden. Ginny, I think we're walking in a man-made tunnel directly under Hogwarts lake!"

"Oh," she said. It was comforting in a way to know their location (like they'd known in that tunnel near the third floor Defense corridor), but otherwise Ginny didn't know what to say.

"Come on, let's see where it goes?"

"What do you mean, where it goes?" Ginny wondered.

"Well, I've been thinking about it," Harry answered. "This main tunnel behind Slytherin's statue is the one I saw the basilisk come out of, right? So it would suggest that it's the main tunnel the snake used. It's also the widest, the only one that slopes downward, and we haven't seen a turn off into another tunnel yet. So there's something about this tunnel that's different from the others."

"Okay," Ginny agreed, following his logic so far, "go on."

"And the fact that the statue's mouth has to be opened by a Parseltongue suggests that the snake was trapped here before Voldemort let it out, right? So knowing that the snake was placed here by Slytherin a thousand years ago, how did the basilisk survive the whole time? I mean, sure it could have hibernated or something, but I doubt even a basilisk could hibernate for hundreds of years at a stretch. There's plenty of space to move around in and all, but there's just a single problem. What did the damn thing eat, if the main Chamber doors were closed, and the basilisk couldn't get out of this tunnel, let alone the whole Chamber? I think there's another way out of this tunnel, and I think I know where it goes."

"Where?"

"The Forbidden Forrest!" Harry answered excitedly. "If you draw a line from the castle towards the lake, and continue past it, you end up in the deepest part of the forest. If the basilisk somehow got out, it'd have plenty of prey to feed off, and could stay close by. I also remember something Aragog told me in my second year."

"Aragog, the giant spider Ron's always going off about?"

"Yes," he said. "When Ron and I went to talk with Aragog, after Hagrid got arrested, I remember him saying something about the monster in the Chamber of Secrets. We didn't know what it was then; this was before Hermione was petrified; but he did say that spiders refused to speak its name, because it was the most feared enemy of all his children. Remember; Aragog was brought here by Hagrid, and has only lived in the area since then. So tell me, why would Aragog and his family fear something that was locked up in the castle, and only rumored to exist? It's because it wasn't locked up in the castle!"

Somewhat the basilisk was escaping into the forest to feed, and it scared the spiders away. It probably only came out when it absolutely had to feed, maybe only once every few years, but still! And I'm betting this tunnel has something to do with that escape!"

Ginny thought Harry was assuming too many things and jumping to too many conclusions, but supported him in that it was a possibility, and the only way to find out for sure was to continue down the tunnel, and find out if it led anywhere. While Harry was rationalizing to himself, they had kept walking, and must have left the lake far behind, because the ceiling wasn't damp anymore.

It was easily another twenty minutes of brisk walking that led Harry and Ginny to a large door. Since they'd past the lake, the tunnel had changed direction to slope back upward, and the grade was so steep that they'd found built-in steps at places. Harry wasn't sure if they'd reached ground level again, but guessed they were close. He tried looking through the walls, but it was dark all around. And where as the third floor corridor had lighting that aided Harry's vision, the dark forest (if that was where they were), didn't allow enough sunlight to pass through the heavy canopy to allow him to see clearly. The only hopes of verifying their location was opening the huge door.

And huge it was. At least eight feet in circumference, the large circular door was similar to the one with five bronzed snakes that opened the main Chamber, but with a few differences. First off, there were no snakes like the other door. There were also no apparent mechanisms or handles to open it with, nor were there any signs of recent use. Grooves carved out in the floor, and seams breaking up the rock face were in fact the only evidence that it was in fact an opening. There was something special though. There were two narrow openings in the door, about five feet off the ground, which Harry immediately recognized. Considering their placement on the door, and the context for which the door was used, it was easy to figure out really. The two holes were fang depressions, and would perfectly sheath two large basilisk fangs, which Harry was very familiar with. 'The fangs must act like keys,' Harry realized, 'and open the door to the outside forest. It's a good thing I kept some.'

"What are those holes for, Harry?" Ginny asked. She too had noticed the grooves, but hadn't put two and two together yet. She'd been unconscious when Harry had a fang driven into his arm, and hadn't been around when he'd collected the remaining ones earlier in the year. He didn't think it could hurt to explain.

"Well, it's only a guess," Harry went on, "but I'd say those two holes would fit the front two basilisk fangs perfectly. It was probably some sort of lock that Salazar Slytherin came up with, to allow his pet out of the Chamber. Smart really, if you think about it. It completely seals off the entryway from the outside, and from the inside, only the basilisk itself can open the door. It must have had to open its mouth, and stick its fangs in these holes to get out and feed. Now that the basilisk is dead, I don't think this door will open ever again."

"Couldn't somebody just stick two fangs in those holes though, and open it up?"

Harry had to admire how perceptive she was. He was already planning to do just that. But that wasn't something he was comfortable sharing with Ginny just then.

"Probably," he feigned. "Maybe, I don't know. I'm only guessing as to what those holes even are. But if I'm right, it doesn't matter. I collected the fangs from the dead basilisk months ago, and let Mr. Ollivander in Diagon Alley have them to work with. Right now, I'm sure most of the fangs have been cut down and made into wand cores. Either way, it's too late to do anything about it now. At least the door will remain shut. I'd hate to think of what could happen if Voldemort found this entryway, and got inside the school. Because the Chamber was hidden from the other founders, I doubt many of the wards that protect the castle apply here. I've already tried to apparate, and that didn't work, so at least that's something. If Voldemort were able to get in here, I'm afraid he would have access to the school without anybody knowing about it."

"That's a scary thought. We should still tell Dumbledore, though."

"Agreed," Harry said. 'But it's not a priority, as the fangs don't exist anymore. Let's just get cleaned up and ready for Hagrid's. I'll tell Dumbledore about this entryway the next time I meet with him."

That was good enough for Ginny, and so the two began the long journey back to the main chamber. Harry could have had Hedwig take them, but he wanted to shut the second door back up tight, and extinguish the torches he'd lit. Plus, the almost hour long walk gave him time to think. Although Ginny was still holding his hand, they had fallen into a comfortable silence, and both were content with just a leisurely walk back.

Harry's mind was racing though. This new entryway was something that either Voldemort didn't know about (unlikely), or something that he couldn't access because he didn't have the basilisk fangs. Either way, Harry was sure he could use this information somehow, if he gave it enough thought. Harry also wanted time later to come back down alone, with the fangs he'd held back from Ollivander. The ones he kept, he meant to experiment with as potion ingredients, and luckily he hadn't used any of them yet. Now, Harry was glad. Not only because he had refrained from crushing them and harnessing their venom, but also for the fact that he had decided to keep them from Ollivander in the first place. Harry had made sure to keep the larger fangs for himself, and had no doubt that the largest two would be exact matches for the holes he'd found. Slowly, a plan was forming in his mind.

After returning to the Chamber, extinguishing the torches, and locking the door back up with a hissed word, Hedwig made herself available to fly them both up the grimy slide. Ginny was worried about getting filthy all over again, and kindly asked Hedwig to transport them up. It only took a moment to grab onto her tail feathers, and next they knew, both Ginny and Harry were back inside Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. The ghost was present this time though, and her wails could be heard coming from deep inside the U-bend of her toilet. Not wanting to deal with her right then, Harry quickly instructed the Chamber entrance to seal itself, and all but dragged Ginny out the door.

"Who's there? I heard you! Come to make fun of miserable, Moaning Myrtle?"

Harry didn't stop to answer, and before Myrtle could extract herself from her cubicle, both teens were out the door and already racing to find a secret passage back up to the seventh floor.

"Thank Merlin," Harry breathed heavily, when they were far enough away that he was confident that the ghost wouldn't follow him. "I always feel weird talking to her."

"Why," Ginny giggled, "because she has a crush on you?"

Harry blushed, but forced himself to not turn away.

"It's not just that," he answered. "She's just so morbid all of the time. And do you know she spies on the prefects, when they're having baths? That's what she did to me back two years ago, when I was figuring out the clue to the second task. How'd you feel talking to some ghost with a crush, who'd seen you starkers? Would you stay to share a cup of tea?"

"No," she laughed, still catching her breath from the mad dash, "I suppose not. Still, it's funny. As if you don't have enough problems right now, with the dance coming up and all the girls in school wanting to ask you."

"As if they even know who I am," Harry muttered. "They're just asking out a name, 'The Boy-Who-Lived' and all that. If they even knew who I was in the slightest, they'd know I'd turn down anyone who asked me, just because of that. Like this morning with Cathy. I've spent six years at Hogwarts already, and we've traded maybe five words in all that time! Why's she interested now, all of the sudden? At least when I asked Cho out, I sorta knew her. We're both seekers, and I wasn't after her because she was popular or anything."

"Well," Ginny said, wanting to not discuss Cho, "you better come to terms with it, because the next few weeks are going to be hell for you. Until you find a date, you're prime meat mister."

Knowing she was right, Harry visibly sighed, which caused Ginny only to laugh more. Wanting to return the favor, Harry smiled his own cheeky grin, and asked, "How about you? Who are you going to ask

to the dance? Dean? Neville? I'm sure whoever you choose, Ron won't be that bothered."

That took the wind right out of Ginny's sails. "Oh, don't get me started on him! We've not even getting along well right now, and he had the gall this morning to butt into my life again. It's not like I'd interfere with his social life, if he had one. Even if he got the courage to ask out Hermione, I'd only be happy for him. Maybe a little teasing, sure, but nothing like the twins would do. Ron however goes ballistic every time I have a date, or even hint about a new guy I might like. It's getting annoying, you know."

"I know," Harry said. "But that still doesn't answer my question. Who are you going to ask? I promise I won't tell Ron, not that he'd listen to me anyway."

Ignoring his comment about Ron, Ginny just shrugged her shoulders. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure if there's anybody I'd want to ask. I mean, yes, I could ask a friend, and we'd have a good time. But as far as a boy I like? I'm not interested in anyone right now. Michael was too into Ravenclaw to have an inter-house relationship, so I dumped him. And Dean was just a joke for Ron's sake, as you well know. Colin's my closest friend of the fifth year boys, but that wouldn't really work out (Harry laughed). And I don't know many other boys from other houses well enough to like them yet."

Harry nodded. "Looks like you're in the same situation as me. Only difference is, that you get to choose not to ask anyone, while I'm stuck with getting tons of invites."

The conversation lingered for awhile longer until the two finally reached the seventh floor. The plan was to head for their dorm rooms to get cleaned up for tea with Hagrid, as they were very dirty. Harry worried though that too many questions would be raised, and motioned Ginny to wait for a second while he pulled out his Marauder's Map. The coast was clear for them, as far as the hallways were concerned. But the common room was packed with students, including all their closest friends. All of them would notice the extreme filth on their robes if Harry and Ginny were to enter, and their cover story would be blown. Harry knew he could probably use his cloak to

sneak up to his dorm room, but that would leave Ginny stranded. And it was impossible for Harry to escort Ginny to her dorm first, because boys weren't allowed up the stairs. Harry and Ron had tried that the previous year, and got knocked on their asses for the effort.

Ginny had the perfect solution though, and led Harry down a side hall to a very familiar corridor. 'Of course,' Harry thought. 'Why didn't I think of this?' The Room of Requirement would take care of their needs.

Harry wasn't expecting to find what he did though, once through the open door after whispering his password. He expected to find a change of clothes, or some wet towels to clean himself with. So had Ginny; by the look on her face. Instead though, they found two shower stalls, each having a bench to hold their possessions, and divided by a canvas screen.

"Um, Ginny," Harry said. "I'm pretty sure this isn't what I was thinking."

"Me neither," she replied back, way too quickly. "I was just thinking about finding a clean change of robes, and a washbasin."

"Same here. Although a shower would work better. But it hadn't even crossed my mind, because of, well, you know."

Ginny blushed. "Same here."

The two stood dumfounded for a moment, still not speaking, when suddenly Harry smacked himself in the head. "Duh!"

"What," Ginny asked him.

"We're so stupid," he explained. "This is the Room of Requirement, so it provides what we require. But it can't give us clean robes, because they wouldn't exist once we left the room. Instead, it provided what we each subconsciously wanted to do. Get real clean, and hence the showers. Even if we had found some clean clothes, I don't much fancy having them disappear once I'm back in the hallway."

“So, what?” Ginny looked extremely nervous. “We’re just supposed to strip down and take a shower? Sorry Harry, but not over my dead body.”

“Well, can you think of another way to get clean? If you haven’t noticed, you’re filthy.” To emphasize his point, Harry reached over to her, running his fingers through her hair. The action would have caused Ginny normally to hitch her breath and possible blush, except the pull and slight pain from Harry’s fingers stopped her. Harry couldn’t even move his hand a few inches without her knotted hair catching, and when he pulled back his hand, Ginny saw at least four colors of mold and muck stuck to it.

“Ew,” Ginny said, seeing what came from her own head.

“You have no idea,” Harry said wiping his hands on his already dirty robes, slightly revolted. “I didn’t think it would be that bad. There’s wet stuff still in there, and I think some bugs.”

“Bugs!” Ginny screamed, not comfortable with the thought of bugs furrowing their way through her hair. Pulling her hair loose and trying to shake her head free, she continued screaming, “Get them out! Get them out!”

“Realx!” Harry said, grabbing her shoulders and forcing her to be calm. “It’s not like huge spiders or anything. Just a few flies. They’re all over the place though; probably been there since that first slide down the muck. I bet I have them in my hair too.”

“Well,” Ginny barbed, “you never could tell, with how messy it always is. In fact, your hair looks exactly the same as it always does.”

“Har har,” Harry mocked, “very funny! Now, I’d like to get cleaned up if you don’t mind.”

“Fine!” Ginny said with a sarcastic grin. “But no peeking! You stay on your side of the divider, and I’ll stay on mine. And if I catch you looking Harry Potter, I’ll not only tell Ron, but all my brothers what you did.”

Harry shuddered at the idea of having six Weasleys after his hide, but shook off the thought. He felt like playing back.

"Don't worry about me Ginny, I can restrain myself. Remember, I could use my magical lens if I really wanted too. Blue underwear, huh? I could check, you know? You just worry about not doing any peeking yourself, or I'll send a note to Crabbe and Goyle in your handwriting, asking them to the dance as your partners. I'm sure they'd love to accept."

"You wouldn't?" Ginny asked, as if horrified. The threats had turned into a game though, and neither of them were serious.

"Just keep your elbow out of the butter dish, and your eyes in your own stall, and we'll be fine."

Ginny groaned. "I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

The two traded barbs while they each entered their private stalls, but once undressed, common sense and awkwardness silenced them both while they showered. As a result, Harry could hardly tell that Ginny was only a few meters away, and vice versa. It was much like the divided showers in the Quidditch locker rooms actually, except that as the stalls were made for one person, not an entire team, they were much closer to each other.

Harry finished his shower first, and since he heard the water still going with Ginny, decided to trim his toenails to waste time. The Room immediately provided him with clippers, and thanks to the wooden bench close by, Harry didn't have to stand on one foot and worry about falling over. He must have wasted three minutes doing that, and still Ginny wasn't finished. So Harry took the chance to get out and quickly dress. If Ginny finished before he was ready, he'd hear the water shutting off, and have the chance to jump back behind the canvas screen. Luckily it didn't happen, and Harry got his robes back on with plenty of time to spare. Somehow his clothes were clean again (either sent down to the house-elves, or cleaned by the Room; he didn't know), and Harry made a vague attempt to brush and style his hair in the mirror on the wall.

"Oh, don't even bother dear," the mirror chided him. "We both know there's no use!"

"How do you know?" Harry asked the mirror.

"Every mirror in the castle knows that unruly black mop by now young man! It was the talk of the bathroom mirrors for your entire first week here."

Harry looked horrified. "You mirrors talk to each other?" Quietly, he heard a giggling from behind him. Without even noticing, Ginny had ended her shower, and must have grabbed her clothes when he wasn't looking, and was now dressing behind the screen.

"Oh course they talk, Harry," Ginny continued to laugh from behind her cover. "How else do you think us girls learn which other girls are wearing what robes, or what hair styles are most popular? Honestly, if you only ever tried to spend some time getting to know your mirror, you'd have learned this. Why else do you think they can talk?"

"They've only ever insulted my hair before," Harry mumbled.

"That's because you've probably never had a decent conversation with one before. Haven't you ever wondered why girls take so long getting ready? It's because we're always listening to our mirror's advice, and trying out different styles."

By then Harry was feeling a right tool, and just encouraged Ginny to finish dressing so they could leave. Hermione and the others were meeting Hagrid for tea in less than an hour, and Harry didn't want to miss the visit. He'd only seen Hagrid in passing and at meals since the holiday break, and was looking forward to talking with his oldest friend.

Soon enough, Ginny was ready, and appeared from behind her stall completely put together, including dried hair and the small amount of make-up she usually wore. Harry noticed she just started wearing that this past year, but hadn't said anything about it. Harry wondered if Ron even noticed.

"All ready to go?" She asked, brushing non-existent lint off her robes as she checked the time.

"Yes! I've been ready for the past half-hour. You may be a Weasley, but somehow I don't think you're used to being allowed the same amount of time in the bathroom as your brothers are. They'd hex your hide off if you took so long at home!"

"Well, we're not at the Burrow now, are we? During the school year I'm allowed to take as long to get ready as I like, so shush up. You could have taken a few extra minutes yourself, you know. Your hair's not even dried yet!"

"I did take some extra time," Harry defended himself. "While I was waiting for you, I cleaned my ears, clipped my toenails, and even got the chance to brush my teeth. And I never dry my hair, so don't go there. The one time I let Lavender try that, I ended up looking like an electrocuted puffskin until I took another shower. If you think my hair's a mess now, you should have seen me then."

"Well," Ginny thought out loud, "next time you could try using a flattening iron."

"I'll pretend like you just didn't say that," Harry said back calmly. "Draco Malfoy may use irons and product in his hair, but I'm not him. Nor do I think any decent bloke should be. Now let's get going to Hagrid's. We'll be a little early, but at least my hair will dry before the others see me. Remember; not a word about the Chamber yet. As far as they know, we were just going over some Arithmancy equations."

Ginny agreed, and the two quickly made their way down to Hagrid's hut. They were indeed early, and Hagrid wasn't there to greet them, nor was Fang. Probably feeding some of his animals in the pen he kept close by, or off in the woods hunting for some meat. His hut was warm and inviting though, and Harry and Ginny let themselves in to warm by the fire. Hagrid had no problems with them making themselves feel like home when he wasn't around, so neither of them felt like they were intruding. A pot of boiling water was evident over the small fire, as was a batch of Hagrid's infamous rockcakes

warming on a nearby tray. Harry immediately vanished the snacks with his wand, before Hagrid would have the chance to offer them to him or his friends. If asked about them, Harry would just claim he was hungry, and ate them as he was waiting.

“Harry,” Ginny said from her seat next to him on the large armchair they were sharing. “I really want to thank you for asking me to accompany you today. At first I thought you were mental, but now that it’s over, I really do think it helped me to go down there. I’ve tried not to think about my first year and Tom since you saved me, but for some reason, I don’t think I’ll have many nightmares about it anymore. Or at least, not about the Chamber of Secrets. I owe that to you.”

Without preamble, she punctuated her gratitude by leaning over and kissing him lightly on the cheek. She lingered slightly longer than she needed to, but after almost a full day of holding hands together, the small sign of affection didn’t bother Harry in the least.

“No problem Gin,” he answered. “Like I said, I saw how Neville stood up to his demons yesterday, and I knew you’d do just as well. I’m just glad we got the chance to do it alone, without having the others swarming about. And as odd as it may sound; after crawling around in a dank cave for hours on end; I actually had a lot of fun with you today. Weird, huh?”

Ginny laughed. “Not at all! I was thinking the same thing actually. It’s not a typical first date, I admit, but I enjoyed it nonetheless. I could have done without the muck, though.”

Harry shuddered as he remembered running his fingers through her hair, and what came out of it when he pulled back. “Yuck! Yeah, that wasn’t the best part. First date though, huh? Is that what we did today?” Suddenly, Harry wasn’t as comfortable as he felt moments earlier.

Neither was Ginny, judging by her blush.

“Well...sort of, I guess. We did just spend the day together, and we both admitted we enjoyed ourselves. I know it’s not like we’re going out or anything, but some people might call it a date. I mean...”

“Ginny,” Harry cut her off, “relax. I didn’t mean anything bad by it. I don’t mind calling it a date, as I guess it was one. I just didn’t think of labeling it like that till you mentioned it. You know what though? Even with the muck and the dark and the horrible smell, I still had a way better time than that Hogsmeade trip I spent with Cho at Madam Puddifoot’s.

Reassured, Ginny’s blush faded as she too admitted that not all of her dates with Michael Corner the year before had gone smashingly. Harry was intrigued to learn just how rocky of a start they’d gotten off to, as Ginny very rarely talked about her time as Michael’s girlfriend. It’s not that she was ashamed or embarrassed, it’s just that as Ron was often around, she tended to avoid conversations that she knew would send him over the edge.

“So,” Ginny said a few moments later after an uncomfortable silence, “who do you think will end up going to the dance together?”

Harry wasn’t sure. Because the girls had to ask guys out, that threw his whole way of looking at things, and he realized he didn’t pay attention to the rumors about who liked whom among the female students. He told Ginny this, but she wasn’t paying attention.

“Would you like to go with me to the dance,” she all but blurted out when Harry finished his observation. “I mean, just as friends. You said earlier that you didn’t fancy anyone, so it’s not like you’re waiting for an invitation. And I don’t plan on asking anyone either...”

“Ginny.”

“...and Ron would probably give anyone I did ask a hard time....”

“Ginny.”

“...and even if he did approve of someone, I don’t think there’s even a friend I could ask who wouldn’t want to spend the night dragging me around to all their housemates...”

"Ginny," Harry finally had to almost shout. Realizing she had been rambling, she blushed. That was nothing though compared to her color when she finally listened to Harry's answer.

"I'd love to go to the dance with you." Because he'd been trying to get Ginny to listen to him, Harry didn't even realize how forward that sounded. "I agree, there's not anyone I especially want to go with, and I think we could have a lot of fun, just as long as you don't expect me to be a suave dancer. At the least, now my excuse of going with somebody else would actually be true. I'm glad you asked."

Ginny just smiled. "Me too!" She was a little disappointed with how aloof his answer had been, but knew he didn't mean to sound that way. Regardless though, she'd asked out one of the school's most eligible bachelors, and he'd accepted; even if only as a friend.

It wasn't long after that that Hagrid and the others arrived. Hermione and Luna were present, and not surprisingly, Ron had made up a bogus excuse to avoid Harry. He promised he'd see Hagrid in class though. As for Neville, Harry had no idea where he was, but after such an eventful day interrogating his parents' torturers, Harry thought his friend deserved some alone time if he wanted it.

Not much else happened to Harry that day. Patrolling with Cami that night was uneventful as always, although the two did have a nice conversation. Cami was pumping Harry for info about the dance, and he finally admitted to being asked in earnest. He felt he could trust her after weeks of friendship with the truth, and oddly enough, wasn't concerned that Cami was about to ask herself. She had made clear enough when they first met, that although she had no problems with being friendly, she didn't want to place herself in danger, and therefore didn't want to get particularly close to Harry and his troubles. A normal person might have been offended by such a statement, but Harry was just relieved at the time. Already he was too concerned with worrying over his few close friends. After being partly responsible with Cedric's, and then Sirius's death, Harry could accept Cami's decision. Plus, he still mourned Amber and got a little misty eyed, when he allowed himself to think about her death.

It turns out, Cami wasn't pumping for information about Harry; she was interested in some of his friends. There was no one in Hufflepuff she particularly wanted to ask to the dance, and wanted to know if Harry thought anyone he knew might make a nice dance partner. Harry wasn't sure, so he gave her a general run-down of all the friends he had, and what their personalities were like. Cami didn't have many friends out of her house, and was quite shy, so even the little Harry could tell her about Steven Cornfoot of Ravenclaw, or Orion Flint of Slytherin was of use to her.

After busting a kissing couple, running across Mrs. Norris twice and retreating the other way, and cleaning up a mess Peeves had made with ink pellets, Harry escorted Cami back to Hufflepuff before continuing on to the Entrance Hall. Technically, both of them were supposed to check in with the second patrol before going back to their dorms, but the past weeks had been so quiet, nobody seemed to mind a few shortcuts all around. And as Cami's house was in the opposite direction of Gryffindor Tower, Harry felt more comfortable walking Cami there, then letting her walk the deserted castle hallways alone.

The reason was quite simple really. Although he never told Cami, and never hinted that he knew, Draco Malfoy had been following him all night long from a discrete distance. Harry only spotted him by using his x-ray lens, and made sure he didn't say anything that could be used against him. Draco was up to something, and until Harry knew for sure what it was, he wanted to keep the Slytherin close by.

The next two weeks flew by for Harry and his friends. Classes resumed in earnest, and Harry was fully over the funk he'd experienced that first week. Quidditch practice started back up, D.A. meetings were scheduled, and all in all, things were back to normal.

Ron was still being cool towards Harry, but after being yelled at by Hermione for skipping tea with Hagrid simply because of his "childish behavior," he made better strides towards being civil at least. While playing Quidditch, the fact that the keeper didn't have much interaction with other players helped tremendously, but even then, Harry let Ginny handle her brother. And she made it clear the very first practice back, that if either of them let their personal disagreement bleed over to affect the team, she'd call for replacements in a heartbeat.

Harry's potions work continued to show vast improvements, and even though he hadn't mastered all of the recipes from his sixth year text, he had brewed them successfully enough to please almost anyone besides Snape. And knowing that he'd never want nor need the surly Potion Master's approval, Harry thought it best to continue on in his study, rather than continue to strive for the perfection he knew he'd never get. So Harry began to study seventh year potions in the time he allocated the subject, even though it was technically more advanced than what he should be covering. Some of the truth serums Harry had experimented with before mastering Veritaserum were of that caliber, but otherwise his lackluster attempt at Polyjuice with Ron and Hermione back in second year was his only foray into advanced potions. Still, independent study had its definite advantages, and Harry rather liked the idea of asking to take his NEWTs for Potion brewing a year early, just to rub it in Snape's face.

Animagus attempts were still a waste of time, nonetheless Harry spent at least an hour a week in deep meditation trying to overcome the block that hid his animagus form in his subconscious. Likewise, his Arithmancy project to reverse the spell that had made Dementors didn't show any progress either. He had made bounds and leaps since starting the ambitious task, but even after he solved the latest hurdle in his path, Harry figured he still had at least four months before he could even begin to think about testing the spell. Until then, the released spirits that Harry had freed from the various Dementors had relented to spend their time in the Shrieking Shack. In small groups they sometimes traveled the country to pass time, but they understood that reversing the spell that had enslaved them within Dementors, who'd been in existence for over a millennia, was no walk in the park. Frankly, they'd been surprised that Harry had made as much progress as he had, and let him know so on one of the rare trips Harry made to visit them in the shack. Remus too visited them often, as he was more free to leave Hogwart's campus, and wanted to let the spirits know they weren't forgotten about.

Speaking of Remus, he returned from his task for the Order as expected, but couldn't tell Harry what it was about as it didn't concern him, and therefore off limits per his agreement with Dumbledore. Apparently with few exceptions the Order had laid low during the

recent holidays, and not much apart from the continued restructuring of the Ministry had happened.

Talks continued to figure out a way of making Azkaban more secure. But the fact remained that with as few aurors as the Ministry employed, and the current class at least a year from finishing training, there weren't enough guards to watch over any prisoners they happened to catch. Only a few Death Eaters had been caught since the last breakout, and luckily there were enough holding cells at the Ministry building to avoid using Azkaban. Remus also let Harry know that Arnold Peasegood's internal search for spies and conspirators had only found a few low ranking Ministry employees. Apparently once Bones stepped in as Minister and made clear she was going to restructure the Ministry, Voldemort's agents either fled or were ordered to leave within weeks. He couldn't even have known that Peasegood (the former Obliviator) was secretly administering Veritaserum to every Ministry worker, and therefore would have uncovered Death Eater spies regardless. In the face of uncertainty, it seemed that Voldemort was willing to bide his time and act more cautiously than he had in the past.

The third week in January, Harry did manage to sneak back to his Hideaway for a night, bringing Neville along with him. He had promised his friend he'd try so that Neville could visit with his parents, and if Harry was anything, he was true to his word. Ginny had agreed to cover for the two during the afternoon and evening meal saying that they were in Harry's trunk practicing a new spell Harry had discovered. Since most of Gryffindor knew that Harry and Neville frequently practiced together, no one thought the story suspect. And while they didn't stay the night, and returned far earlier than curfew, Harry still managed to provide his friend with four hours of solid, quality time with his parents, while Harry took a joy ride through muggle London on his Indian Chief.

The motorcycle was a pleasure to ride as always, and as much as Harry wished he could shrink the bike and take it with him back to Hogwarts, he knew it wasn't practical. So he enjoyed the time he could, and planned for the day when he could fly the bike carefree without worries of getting caught by either muggles, the Ministry, or his watchers from the Order.

The next week's D.A. meeting was a success as well. Because of their excuse, Harry made sure to show the advanced group the new spell he supposedly just learned with Neville. In truth, it was one Harry had known about for months, but had for some reason he couldn't remember not shared with them right away. The incantation was "Impedimenta Vigoratus," and what the spell did when properly cast was to slow down the heart rate to the point where it caused the victim to fall unconscious from lack of oxygen and circulation in the bloodstream. It was almost undetectable at first though, and so slow acting that the spell was deemed not offensive enough by many, and fell out of favor over the years almost to the point of obscurity. Harry had shown Neville the spell over the holidays, so it was no problem for either of them to move around the D.A. guiding the others in correctly casting it.

Hermione caught on the quickest of course, followed by surprisingly the Flint twins, and then Cho and Ginny. Cho frowned when Harry moved to help Ginny while she got stuck with Neville, and Harry knew before the night was over with, he'd have to have another uncomfortable conversation with his former crush.

"Harry," she asked as expected as the meeting ended, and the room started to clear. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure Cho," he replied, trying his best to sound neutral and not give away the fact that he'd caught Cho's sour face earlier in the night. He still hadn't forgotten how callous and spiteful Cho reacted in the last D.A. meeting of the previous year, and hoped she would have gotten over any issues she had. Judging from her look, she didn't, but Harry knew to reserve a verdict until he talked with her personally.

They both waited until the room cleared of the others like the last time they met, when Cho finally spoke.

"I wanted to apologize Harry," she sounded earnest, "for how I acted the last time we spoke. I had finally gotten over Cedric's death, and realizing that I ruined the start of what could have been a perfectly good relationship, perhaps rushed to try patching things up with you. I didn't consider your thoughts, and that you might be entertaining

different feelings than you did last year. Plus I attacked one of your friends, which I had no right to do. I guess I was just a little jealous, and truth be told, I probably still am. But that's none of my business, and I shouldn't have said the things I did. I'm sorry."

'Well,' Harry thought, 'that's certainly surprising!' Harry didn't know what to expect from Cho, but an apology and the truth certainly never crossed his mind.

"Um," he stumbled, "thanks Cho, I think. I mean, I appreciate your being honest. I admit, I was a bit surprised when you acted the way you did last month, but I accept your apology. I guess I should say I'm sorry too, for reacting so harshly. Some of the things you said I didn't take kindly too, but you couldn't have known how I would have reacted. No hard feelings?"

Cho smiled. "None at all. In fact, I want to make it up to you. I was wondering if you'd like to go with me to the Valentine's Day dance? We could go as friends if you're uncomfortable with anything more, but I just want the chance to show you I'm sorry for the way I acted, and that I think we really could have a good time."

If Harry didn't appreciate Ginny's invitation before, he most definitely did now. Since that day in Hagrid's hut, Harry had been asked by no less than twenty three girls to go to the dance. Saying that he already had a date was both convenient and the truth, and truth be told, after having the time to think about it, Harry was actually looking forward to attending with Ginny, and having a good time.

"I'm sorry Cho," the words had become almost practiced for him, "but I've been asked to the dance already by someone else, and have accepted. Maybe I'll see you there though, and we could share a dance if there's time?" Harry had no intention of dancing with all the girls he'd turned down over the past two weeks, but after hearing him bluntly turn down a seventh year Hufflepuff who she later noticed crying in a loo stall, Hermione had instructed Harry to allude to a dance, regardless of whether he meant it or not.

But as Hermione's advice was running through his mind, Harry couldn't help but notice the crushed look on Cho's face. Apparently,

she had really expected Harry to accept her invitation; if not as a proper romantic date, then at least as a sign to renew a damaged friendship.

"Are...are you just saying that?" Cho stuttered. "I thought I overheard someone saying you were just using that as an excuse to turn down all the girls you didn't know?"

"No Cho, I really am already going with someone. I'm sorry if you heard differently."

"But I thought that you liked me? You even asked me out! You've never gone on a date with anyone else." Harry could also see Cho struggling not to ask who Harry had accepted an invitation from, and she won that particular battle.

"Cho," Harry calmly explained. "I did like you, and I still do. But not in that way anymore. And our date was a year ago, and you can hardly call it successful. I'm sorry if you thought different, but I thought I made this clear when we last talked."

Cho made some incoherent responses, and quickly made her exit. Harry even considered going after her, but didn't know what more he could say, and if he was honest with himself, wanted to avoid another conversation like that at all costs. If he was lucky, Cho would be upset for awhile, but the next time she saw Harry, would pretend like they had never talked.

After that particular D.A. meeting, and the fact that Cho had avoided Harry, nothing could bring him down; not even Ron.

Harry managed to sneak back into the Chamber of Secrets alone with the two largest fangs, and indeed they did fit into the holes in the door. And like clockwork and without obstruction, the large round door swung open to a desolate yet dangerous part of the forest, just like Harry had thought. There were also holes on the door's outside, so the fangs were necessary from both sides, which Harry was thankful for. That meant that as long as Harry kept the fangs in his possession, he didn't have to worry about Voldemort finding his way inside the castle.

His studies went well, and along with his independent study, Harry continued to learn new spells and more magical theory at a steady rate. His practice countering the Cruciatus curse suffered a temporary setback, but only because Harry had done without that particular pleasure over the holidays. With no more excuses, Harry set himself back into the routine of cursing his double (who showed back up the day after his venture into the Chamber of Secrets with Ginny) each afternoon during a free period. His duels resumed too; both of the magical and the muggle variety.

With so much on his plate, it was hard to juggle so many of his studies while maintaining a social life, but aided by the extra time his double provided him, Harry managed. No matter how busy he got, or how exciting a new spell or discovery he came across in his studies was, Harry made sure to continue his tutoring sessions with Ginny and Luna. He also managed to keep his weekly massage sessions with Ginny after team practices, which got bumped back up to four times a week in preparation for the next game. Then there was making time to spend with Remus and Hagrid, continuing his private dueling sessions with Neville, reading a few fictional books just to give his mind a time to relax, and keeping tabs on Draco Malfoy who continued to shadow Harry wherever he went, and who thought he remained unnoticed in the hidden hallways and secret passages that Hogwarts provided.

It wasn't until a particularly uneventful day mid-week, that Harry had the first hic-up in the new year. Like normal before going to sleep, Harry spent about fifteen minutes clearing his mind using the Occlumency techniques he'd developed, and after that, spent another few minutes checking in with Cathy and her seventh year friends to see if any of them got new bed outfits for Christmas. It was because he was sure he'd practiced his Occlumency, Harry knew that the vision he received late that night was real.

Voldemort had somehow heard about the upcoming school dance. And regardless of the fact that he hadn't been asked by anyone, he was going to attend!

AUTHOR NOTES:

Well, it's been about a month, and here's your next chapter. My life has been hectic lately, and with the problems encountered last month while updating their system, this update took longer than I expected. I just hope you're all happy with what I had.

Yes, not a lot of action this past chapter, and yes, it's mostly Harry/Ginny. Well, I did claim this fic would contain a slight relationship between the two, so who else did you think Harry was going to the dance with? Make no mistakes though, there will be no talk about the "L" word, and I appreciate if you refrained from using the word "ship," as it makes my skin crawl. I was just laying the groundwork for the dance, which we'll only see some of. As you might tell from my ending line, Harry's going to have more to worry about come Valentine's Day then worrying about remembering to complement Ginny on her dress robes.

I made review responses to this chapter weeks ago when I thought I was going to update, so I apologize now if I missed some of your reviews that came after that date. I promise in the future to only post my responses when I'm sure I'll post the new chapter soon. As always, those can be viewed in my Yahoo! Group "files" section, so please follow the links from my bio page to get there.

I'll also be having two chats within the next few days, if anyone wants to join in to ask me questions, bitch at me for taking so long to update, or to just talk about HP in general. Again, follow my links to the "Chat" page for that. That's all for now, and please let me know what you think in a review.

Ross

## Chapter 29 – Let's Dance!

"My Lord," Lucius said bowing on the cold stone floor, "thank you for granting me an audience."

"You wished to see me, Lucius. For both our sakes, I hope it proves not a waste of time."

"Yes my Lord. My son has written me of an event to take place soon at Hogwarts. A school dance, and a muggle-themed one at that. A disgrace! I thought you would like to know, as well as of the Hogsmeade trip which will occur the weekend before. Since the dance was not announced previously, and dress robes were not among the items on the school's summer list, I suspect Potter as well as his friends will all be in town purchasing robes. I thought we might strike, if you so fancy the idea."

"Attack Hogsmeade," Voldemort considered. "No. It is too obvious, and too wide a target. No doubt Dumbledore will suspect such a thing, and be well prepared for it. Not to mention my forces are not yet large enough for such an attack. Still, I am pleased with this news Lucius. You have done well, as has your son. He has long been without useful information, and I believe he just proved his worth. And while we will not attack Hogsmeade, I do have an idea that may indeed work."

"I'm sure whatever you plan will be flawless, my Lord," Lucius groveled.

Voldemort just sneered and ignored him. Turning to the only other person in the room, he instructed, "Wormtail, leave us, and send for Bella. I have a special assignment for her."

"Y-Yes master," Wormtail bowed, and quickly left the room for once without a dose of the Cruciatus.

"Lucius," Voldemort turned his attention back to his prone servant. "I think I'd rather like to attend this muggle dance Dumbledore's holding. A shame I've not been invited. Still, I see no reason not to...crash the party; I think is the proper term."

Voldemort thought a moment, and then continued, "Contact our newest initiates, and have them ready the weekend of the dance. Contact Mulciber, Nott, and Warrington Sr. as well. You four shall lead my troops against the castle the night of the dance. Keep that information to yourself for now though. As loath as I am to admit it, I suspect we have a traitor in our ranks. Our missing men have caused me great concern, and although their status is irrelevant, I'd hate to foil our plans prematurely. You alone Lucius will know of our goal. Instruct the men to meet you someplace neutral the night of the dance. From there, you will inform them of the mission, and immediately apparate to Hogsmeade and march on Hogwarts. I will inform you later of just what your goal is."

"March on Hogwarts?" Lucius asked unbelievably. But as soon as the words passed his mouth, he wished he had held his tongue.

"You dare question my leadership Lucius? No matter, as your opinion is of no concern to me. I do not expect you and a handful of new recruits to be able to breach the wards. You are merely a diversion; canon fodder if you will. The real attack will happen elsewhere, and only key players will be involved. Speaking of which, has your son found a date to this dance yet?"

"No, my Lord," Lucius answered, glad that he'd gotten off without being cursed. "That is one of the reasons he wrote home. Apparently one of the disgusting rules of this muggle tradition is that females must ask the males to accompany them. Draco inquired if I had any contacts still on the school's Board of Governors that might be persuaded to intervene. I have not made any inquiries yet."

"Do not," Voldemort ordered. "Your position in society is perilous as it is Lucius, and I'd rather you reserve your few markers for more important matters."

A pause again.

"Inform your son he is to be asked to the dance by a pureblood witch as soon as possible. Who she is need not matter, as long as she is not a Slytherin."

Confused, and not looking forward to giving his son such an order, Lucius asked, "My Lord?"

"Was I incoherent, Lucius? A pureblood witch not a member of our illustrious house, is to ask Draco to accompany her to the dance, by whatever means necessary. Inform your son to secure her invite within two weeks, and you are to inform me the moment he accepts."

"Yes my Lord." Lucius thought it best not to question his instructions further. Draco would just have to make due. 'No doubt the Parkinson chit will be upset,' he inwardly smiled, 'but she's had too close an eye on Draco and our family fortune for far too long,'

"Is there anything else you require of me, my Lord?"

Voldemort shook his head. "No Lucius, just make sure your son understands his orders, and the men you contact are ready. You are responsible alone for this Lucius, and if things do not proceed smoothly, there will be trouble. Do I make myself clear?"

Lucius shuddered as he nodded. Only two people in his life made him feel like that. The other had been his father, who he had killed himself using a rare poison years ago. As far as Lucius was concerned, his father had deserved it after all the years of stern upbringing and abusive punishments. And while he had learned a great deal from his father, he knew at the time he couldn't advance without talking over as the Malfoy patriarch.

Wormtail entered a moment later, having completed his task. Briefly Lucius wondered what it would be like to be demoted to that of a personal servant; running errands that a house-elf or owl could perform. For that was what Wormtail's position was since being broken out of Azkaban. Although not surprisingly, he'd been absent from all Death Eater meetings his first weeks back; no doubt recuperating from whatever horrible pain Voldemort had inflicted on him for being caught and successfully interrogated.

But he had been dismissed, and as Wormtail began his report to their mutual master, Lucius excused himself from the room, and apparated away. He had a letter to write to his son.

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With February just around the corner, and soon after that the announced Hogsmeade trip (and then after that the school dance), Harry was very concerned with his most recent vision. If Voldemort was planning something (and it was just like him to do it when Harry was finally becoming content), he knew there was no real reason not to go straight to Dumbledore with what he had witnessed.

Yet, Harry had no real proof besides his vision, which Dumbledore was sure to take note of, but to trust completely? No. After the ruse with Sirius, he and the Order would be much too cautious to put all their eggs in one basket again. Besides, if Harry went to Dumbledore, then he wouldn't be able to participate in whatever preparations would be made. And Harry wanted to do more than participate; he wanted to lead them. With another idea already forming in his mind, Harry dismissed the notion of telling Dumbledore anything. Instead he had other, admittedly less life-threatening things to worry about. The next Hogsmeade weekend, the next Quidditch match, his upcoming date with Ginny, and the still strained relationship with this former (how it pained him to say that) best friend.

Indeed, things with Ron hadn't gotten any better in the near month since their fight. And what made it even worse, was that Harry couldn't detect any progress towards things being patched up either. They could be in the same room and not fight, and sometimes even acknowledge each other with a head nod or a small "hello," but anything beyond that seemed to ask way too much. In fact, the last bit of progress Harry had made with Ron was their much heated argument, which many still wanted to know intimate details about. They had been near each other's throats until then, but afterwards, it's as if the two had always turned a shoulder towards each other when speaking. Harry had relived the conversation more than once in his pensieve just to see if things could have gone better, and for the life of him, he didn't think they could have.

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### FLASHBACK: Argument three weeks previous

After asking Neville, Seamus, and Dean for a few private moments, Harry followed Ron up the stairs to the sixth year boy's dormitory dreading the confrontation he was about to have. Ron had made none too clear his feeling towards Harry just a few moments before, and in more than five years of such a strong friendship, harsher words had never been spoken between them.

Approaching the door, Harry didn't bother to knock, and let himself in quietly while closing the door behind him. A spoken silencing charm after that prevented the no doubt heated argument that was sure to come from leaving the confines of the room. Harry had made the mistake of fighting in public in the common room down below, and that had proved disastrous. There wasn't any need for Gryffindor to know more of their personal dirty laundry.

Looking around, Ron was nowhere in sight, but the sounds of running water coming from the attached loo hinted to his whereabouts. Not wanting to intrude on what Ron might childishly call his privacy, Harry decided to wait for him sitting on his bed, rather than enter the bathroom himself.

It only took a few moments before Ron appeared, with what Harry thought might have been tears on his cheeks. Either that, or he had just washed his face; Harry wasn't sure.

Spying Harry from across the room, Ron at first tried to ignore him, but that proved difficult when Harry stood and placed himself in Ron's way. Curling his hands into fists, Harry was surprised that Ron didn't blow up at him right then, and instead took a large detour around him. Figuring it couldn't last, and wanting to provoke something out of the other boy, Harry again moved to block Ron's path, and placed his arms across his chest in a gesture of body language even Ron wasn't about to miss.

"Move," was all Ron said, this time not stepping around his former friend.

"No," Harry replied back curtly. "We need to talk. I'm sorry about not approaching you on the train, but the girls thought I should give you some time to cool down. Well, the whole common room now knows that didn't work, so we need to have this out now. I've no idea what's gotten into you Ron, but this has got to stop now."

"Why?" Ron voiced, not quite yelling. "Why does this, whatever this is, have to be solved, or fixed, or settled? Can't I just be mad at you? Can't the bloody Boy-Who-Lived exist without things going his way for once?"

That hurt Harry badly. Mostly because Harry knew that Ron knew that wasn't true. Things hardly ever went his way. But it also hurt because Harry knew when Ron referred to him not by name, but by titles like "Boy-Who-Lived," he was mighty brassed off.

"Of course I can, you great berk! Be mad all you want, but you can't honestly say I'm so used to having things go the way I want them. Hello! You do remember the Dursleys, right? And the way Snape and Malfoy have constantly been a thorn in my side. This isn't about me, because the way I see it, nothing's changed with me except I've matured some this past summer, and I'm not letting people walk all over me anymore. I'm not the one acting like a drama queen, and throwing tantrums just because once again I'm suffering from a fit of jealousy. This is about you Ron. And I'd like to talk about it, but you only seem to want to point at me and label me the bad guy. Well, I'm not, and I'm sick of you treating me this way. This is what, the second or third time now you've turned on me?"

"All about me, huh?" Ron almost didn't let Harry finish before he started in. "I'm not the one who decided to start keeping secrets, went and found new friends, and dish pity money out like candy. I'm not the one who's laughing behind your back, and rubbing in just how rich I am by giving away presents that nobody else could match. I'm not the one throwing away five years of friendship by going off and doing everything on my own. That's all you, Harry! We used to do everything together; me, you, and Hermione. Now, it's you, and Hermione, and even Ginny, Luna, and Neville, but not me. Besides

Quidditch, where I have to take orders from you, we hardly talk anymore. Instead, you'd rather pal around with Neville."

"This isn't about Neville, Ron," Harry yelled back, as frustrated as he'd ever been about anything before. "Nothing's changed except I'm spending more time with him, as we've gotten to know each other more. Just because he's around, doesn't mean you can't be around too. It's not like it used to be. He's not so shy anymore. He's part of the Quidditch team now, he's part of the D.A., and instead of leaving him at Hogwarts all alone over the holidays, I invited him home with me. Is that so wrong? Can't I have more than one friend at a time, Ron? Or are you too jealous for even that?"

Harry knew he crossed a line when he saw red in Ron's eyes, and the next thing he knew he was staggering back from the blow Ron landed across Harry's cheek. It was a sloppy and poorly executed punch, and though it didn't leave a physical mark, it left a deep emotional one.

The hit did have one positive result though. As Harry rubbed his cheek after realizing what had happened, he noticed that Ron had at least calmed some, and almost looked sorry for his actions. After awhile, Ron sat at the edge of his bed. Not meeting Harry's gaze, he finally broke the silence.

"This isn't about my jealousy Harry," Ron said, and then quickly added, "and yes, I know it's there. But I've always been jealous of you, just as I'm jealous of Bill, and Charlie, and all my other brothers. I can deal with that, because I know most of the time I'm being unreasonable about it all. But it's not just me this time, like it was in our fourth year. You've changed Harry."

Ron took a pause to gather his thoughts, and just as Harry was about to refute his claims, he continued, "You're so much different this year. So much more serious, and rational. You hardly spend any time with the rest of us, just doing nothing. You've always either got your head in a book, are spending time planning Quidditch or D.A. meetings, or are locked in that stupid trunk of yours doing who knows what."

Harry simply nodded, because it was all true so far. But that wasn't anything new to Ron, and Harry had explained months ago to him and the rest why he was so much busier this year.

"And then when I see you finally make the effort to relax and enjoy yourself a little, who do you do it with? Ginny and Neville, that's who. Ginny, who you couldn't stand to be in the same room with alone not a couple years ago, is suddenly your new favorite Weasley. And Neville, who's always been a nice guy yeah, but he's Neville, and now he's your best mate all of a sudden. It's like Hermione and me have been replaced or something. Of course Hermione doesn't see it like that, but she's off in the library half the time anyway, and even she's spending more time with you then I do. It's not my fault I'm not in your classes this year Harry. But it's like you don't even make the effort to spend time with me anymore. Only when it's convenient for you, like when we practice Quidditch, or go to visit Hagrid. Then it's like, 'I gotta go do this, let's see if Ron'll come with me so I can kill two birds with one stone.' Since when did I become a second priority, Harry?"

Harry shook his head strongly. "You're not a second priority Ron, and I'm sorry if you feel that way. I've just got so much stuff to do this year, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. It's not that I try to lump you together with other things. It's just that I've only got so much time in the day, so I guess I try to get as much done as I can at once. Think about it, Ron. When was the last time you saw me just hanging around the common room, killing time? Or spending a weekend sleeping in and putting off homework. I'd love to, but that's not me anymore. Believe it or not, I really do want to spend time with you, Hermione, and the others, but I have to practically schedule you in now so I don't forget."

"That's just my point," Ron interrupted. "That's not something you should be able to forget, or simply schedule! It used to be it just was! You'd get up in the morning, and we'd end up at breakfast together. We'd get out of Potions, and we'd be cursing Snape together. Now I don't even know what you're talking about half the time, and you're so secretive. And then you go and try to be normal like on Christmas and get everyone gifts, and it's like you're completely ignoring how strange things have been the past couple months. And why the

money's nice sure, I've never felt like more of a charity case before in my life. It was like getting money from a total stranger, and I'm supposed to be OK with it because Sirius said so? And about the money my parents got, again I'm the last to know. If I'm your best mate, shouldn't I have been the first to know?"

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just shrugged. Harry clearly remembered he had reasons for not telling Ron at the time, and for the life of him couldn't remember what they were past he was scared of how Ron's jealous streak would react.

After a long time, with neither boy saying anything, Harry saw the hour was getting late and knew his roommates would be up soon. Wanting to try and solve things as best he could, Harry swallowed some of his pride and asked, "So, what do we do about this?"

Ron nodded, but didn't say anything right away.

"Can we just forget it ever happened?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I don't think so," replied Ron. "Not unless you can go back to how you were acting last year, and stop being so solitary all the time."

Harry knew he couldn't, so said nothing. This infuriated Ron even more, and he yelled out, "What the hell are you doing that's so important, anyway? Why can't I know about it? You used to trust me with everything."

And Harry knew he was right. Harry did used to trust Ron with everything, but those were the simple thoughts and actions of boys. Over the summer things had changed, and Harry's role in taking charge of his own life had crossed a line and made him a man. That's where the trouble lay, Harry suddenly realized. Harry was no longer a boy, but Ron had yet to take that step. Ron's world was of secret passages and exciting adventures, where everything would turn out all right in the end. Harry's new world was of clandestine nocturnal meetings where blood and gore were spilt, and if extreme caution wasn't taken, he might not come back alive. The two worlds were very different, and until Ron realized the risks associated with Harry's new life, he could never be as much a part of it as he had Harry's old

one. Neville, Ginny, and even Luna, Harry realized, had all seen more darkness than Ron had, no matter he was the oldest. That's why Harry found them more suited to talk about certain topics. Harry wasn't willing to go back to the way things were, and unless he pretended, which he knew he wouldn't, he'd just have to wait until Ron matured some before the two could be better friends again.

"I'm sorry Ron," Harry said, knowing he was effectively ending his boyhood friendship, "I just can't tell you everything; at least not yet. It's not that I don't trust you, but there's too much at risk for me to trust anyone. Yeah, some people know some stuff, but nobody except me knows everything, and I don't think you'd settle for just a larger piece of the puzzle. What I'm dealing with is life or death type stuff, dealing with Voldemort. And I'm sorry, but that's too important to risk just to smooth over our problems. This is bigger than you, and bigger than me. Maybe one day I can tell you, but not now."

Ron's lips were pressed into a line thin enough to shame McGonagall, but surprising Harry he didn't snap and remained silent.

Seeing not a perfect solution, but at least a chance to end hostilities, Harry continued.

"But I don't see why we have to be so nasty to each other," Harry said, "and I think even you'll agree things were spoken today that were uncalled for, by both of us. We've been mates for a long time, Ron. I may have gotten closer with some of the others like Neville, and I know I've been more private this year, but I still think of you as my best mate. I don't see why we can't still do all the things together we've always done. Visit Hagrid, go on Hogsmeade trips together, needle Hermione."

Harry thought he saw the shadow of a laugh on Ron's face.

"How about we just agree that things are far from perfect, and try to work on it in the future?" Harry proposed. "But in the meantime, we can at least be civil to each other, and not take things out on innocent bystanders like your sister and Neville. I don't want to face down Ginny's bat boogey hex, and in case you haven't noticed, Neville's

been pressing almost 150 lbs. in the weight room. I'd like to avoid angering those two if at all possible, please."

Harry was hoping for another smile, but instead he got a solemn nod from Ron, and his hand extended out in peace. Willing to take whatever he could, Harry reached out to shake it, and was surprised at the strength of Ron's grip.

"This doesn't mean we're alright Harry," Ron maturely said. "But this does mean we've both been idiots, and I'm at least willing to put an end to that. But I really don't understand where you're at this past year. And until I do, I can't pretend that things are different. I need some time to think. So we can be civil, and friendly, and maybe I'll even trounce you in chess if we've got time. But now I'm letting you know, I need some time alone too. To sort this all out. I hope you can respect that. So if I'm spending more time with Dean and Seamus from now on, well, then that's just the way things got to be. Like you said, maybe things will change in the future. But for now, that's the best I can offer."

And without another word, Ron retreated to his bed and pulled the curtains closed. The next morning he was sitting as far away from Harry as possible at the breakfast table, next to his new best mates Dean and Seamus. He passed the salt when Harry asked him to, and thanked Harry when he accidentally dropped a quill in the hallway after lunch, but otherwise the two didn't have anything to say to each other the whole day. And that was that.

END FLASHBACK

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The weeks since Harry's conversation with Ron passed quickly; far quicker than Harry would have expected; and before anyone realized it, early February was upon them and the scheduled Hogsmeade trip only days away.

The second Quidditch match for both Ravenclaw and Slytherin was also scheduled for that Saturday, and even though those houses had

no great quarrel between them like Slytherin and Gryffindor, it was speculated to be a most exciting match.

"Well Ravenclaw pretty much trounced Hufflepuff, so I'd say if Cho's in top form, there's no way Slytherin could get the edge in over them," Ginny argued over breakfast one day.

"That's assuming that Slytherin plays fair, and we all know how likely that is," Harry countered. Things hadn't gotten back to normal between he and Cho the few times they encountered each other in the hallways since she broke down crying, and Harry didn't want news that he was supporting her to get back to her, and be taken the wrong way.

"Yeah," Ron added, "but Ravenclaw's gotta be counting on that. It's not as if them cheating or playing dirty will be anything new." Quidditch was one of the few topics that Ron didn't mind conversing with Harry about, even if it was from three seats further down the table than in the past.

The conversation probably would have continued if a swarm of owls didn't invade the Great Hall just then, bringing their daily post to eager staff and students alike. Ron was the first to reach up and grab his hyperactive owl Pig, and Harry noticed Ginny too had a similar delivery from Raul, in a matching envelope. Letters from home, no doubt. Rowan delivered Hermione her daily copy of The Daily Prophet, and Harry was about to ask to borrow it, when two unfamiliar owls each dropped a parcel on his plate, making a bit of a mess. Although having never seen them before, Harry knew one owl was from the Weasley twins, because no one else would dare to dye their animal such a horrid shade of purple. Expecting a bit of good news, or at least a laugh, Harry decided to open their letter first.

"What do the twins have to say, Harry?" Hermione asked. Apparently Harry wasn't the only one practicing inductive reasoning that morning.

Harry didn't say anything as he read the short missive, and then a smile spread across his face as he shared the good news with his friends.

"It's just news on how their new shop is doing," Harry said happily. "Now that they've got plenty of products, and don't have to worry about a high rent, it says they're doing splendidly, and making tons of Galleons. They're still working on what they want the final layout of their store to look like, but since they opened, they've had a lot of interest from Diagon Alley, and are even thinking of taking out an ad in *The Daily Prophet* next week."

"Why are you finding out about this before we are?" Ron asked grumpily, motioning to himself and his sister.

"Ron," Ginny said patronizingly, "have you opened your letter from Mum yet?"

"No," Ron replied, looking confused.

"Maybe you should," she said, looking mischievous.

His eyebrows raised, Ron cautiously opened his mail, and besides the cream colored parchment his mother always used, a vivid electric blue letter fell out of the envelope as well. Not needing to read it to know it contained the same news Harry just received, Ron looked up embarrassed to see Ginny waiving her own letter (in a hot pink color) with a smirk on her face.

"Sorry Harry," Ron muttered. It was a small consolation after Ron again attacked Harry without cause, but at least he apologized without having to be prompted to.

"No problem," Harry replied back. No more about the matter was said.

"What's your other letter about, Harry?" Neville soon asked after the silence grew too lengthy to be considered comfortable any longer.

"Don't know," Harry answered as he opened it up. Inside he found a short but very professional letter, and smiled once more as he could finally cross another item off his lists of things to do.

"Grimmauld Place has finally sold!" The group knew of his plans, and had been updated regularly on its progress, so it wasn't a big surprise

to them. But they all knew how much Harry wanted to wash his hands of that property, so were all happy for him.

"How much did it go for, Harry?" Ginny asked.

Harry knew better than to answer that question in mixed company, but informed everybody that it sold for more than he, or even his real estate agent had expected. In fact, on the first inspection she had made, Shelly Autumn had estimated the large home to be sold for between one and one and a half million pounds. Harry was pleased to note, although he would have settled for half of that, that the actual selling price had been just under two million pounds, and that was after being billed by Shelly's wizard subcontractors to install muggle utilities and appliances.

In the short note, the real estate agent mentioned that because Grimmauld Place was in an area currently being renovated and restored, the land value was more than she expected. And although it would have been nice to maintain the property in its entirety as is, it was more profitable to split the brownstone up into smaller flats which could be sold or rented separately, like the neighboring homes. Knowing that the "Noble and Most Ancient House of Black" was about to be split up into muggle flats, Harry was even happier with the outcome than he thought he'd be. Not only had he made a tidy profit, but he had spat on pureblood tradition and belief in a move Sirius would have been most happy about.

Harry couldn't help but mention the fact that Grimmauld Place had sold to Dumbledore that night at dinner, but other than the forced smile on the Headmaster's face, nothing else of interest happened that week until the Quidditch match arrived.

As expected, the match was more or less evenly matched, with Ravenclaw's superior experience pitted against tried-and-true Slytherin tactics. Crabbe and Goyle in their beater positions were as ruthless as ever in picking their targets, but fortunately didn't make any injuring contact with the opposing team. Ravenclaw was being cautious. In the end, perhaps it was too cautious, as once the snitch showed, Cho couldn't keep pace with Draco while dodging bludgers, players, and even a few quaffles thrown in her path. The Slytherins

knew in an even match Malfoy could only reach the snitch with a lot of luck on his side, and weren't willing to take that chance. The final score was 80-190 in favor of Slytherin. Hardly a commanding victory, but a win nonetheless.

Ravenclaw grumbled about dirty tactics while the snakes went off to celebrate, but no one could say they really expected a different outcome, so by early the next morning, the whole castle had forgotten the game instead excited about the day's trip to Hogsmeade.

The original reason for the unscheduled trip was to allow students the chance to buy dress robes for the upcoming dance, but as many students (Harry included) already had robes, it was also a chance to just relax and enjoy a day with their friends. Hermione and Ginny went off together to find something to wear, and Ron took off with Neville off all people to find robes as well. So for the first few hours Harry just meandered around town with various people from the D.A. looking in windows and enjoying the break from routine. He had plans to meet his Quidditch team at The Three Broomsticks at one. In one of their earlier practices Harry had promised to buy the team a round of butterbeer if they could pull off a difficult maneuver three times in a row. That seemed to be all the incentive the team needed, and Harry had his money ready to buy the promised round of drinks.

A short while later found Harry sitting comfortably around a large round table in the cozy pub, surrounded with his friends and fellow students. Hermione, some of the other D.A. members, and most of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team had joined them at one point or another, and they were currently talking about who was going to the dance with whom, and trading other random rumors. It had pretty much all been said already, and even Harry was shocked he was so well informed about school gossip until Terry Boot from Ravenclaw mentioned some startling news.

"Have you heard who Morag McDougal's going to the dance with?" Terry asked, as he reached for the pitcher of butterbeer to refill his empty mug. "Draco Malfoy."

Remembering his vision from weeks ago and Voldemort's command to Lucius that Draco find a date that wasn't from Slytherin, Harry set

aside his own drink and sat up straighter in his chair, not wanting to miss whatever was said.

"Yeah right," Ron scoffed, "like Malfoy would ever be caught dead dating a Ravenclaw." Seeing the angry looks around him, he added meekly, "No offence."

"No, it's true," Ernie McMillian added in. "Nobody knows why because she'd never hinted that she liked Draco before now, but I was there when Morag was talking about it to Su Li and Padma. She said it happened after a Charms class two weeks ago. They were the last ones to leave the class, and were talking in the hallway on the way to lunch. Morag was saying it was probably the only civil conversation she'd ever had with him, and for some reason she just up and asked him to the dance. Later when she was talking to Su Li and Padma, she couldn't remember why she did it, but since she wasn't planning on asking anyone else, she figured it didn't matter. She said, the worst that could happen was that he ended up being an ass, and then she'd just hang out with her friends like she would have anyway."

"I bet he cursed her and made her ask him," Ron speculated. Knowing of Voldemort's order, Harry wasn't sure Ron was too far off.

"That's ridiculous Ron," Hermione piped in. "If Draco was going to risk something as severe as casting the Imperious Curse on another student, I doubt he'd do it on something as mundane as finding a date to a school dance."

The others agreed, and suddenly people were asking Hermione who she was going to the dance with. She refused to say, instead keeping it a surprise like she did previously in their fourth year Yule Ball, and soon the discussion moved on. But Harry was still thinking about Malfoy and his sudden interest in Morag McDougal. He'd be keeping an eye on those two.

Before too long, it was mid-afternoon, and the students still left in town paid their bills and started to gather their things for the long walk back to Hogwarts. Having to settle not only his own bill, but for the round of drinks he'd bought his Quidditch team earlier, Harry was one of the last ones to exit the pub, but found Neville, Frank, Natalie, and

Ginny waiting for him, not willing to let anyone, not even Harry Potter, walk back to school alone. Yes things had been relatively quite the past few months, but Voldemort was still on the loose, and still had many Death Eaters at his disposal.

"All ready there, Harry?" Neville asked, nodding up the path towards the castle.

"Yeah, let's just wait for Ron and Hermione." He knew most of the trip would probably be made in silence if he traveled with Ron, but like his friends, he didn't want to leave anyone behind on their own, or even in a small group of two.

"No need to wait," a voice called out, having just exited the pub himself. Terry Boot approached the group, motioning over his shoulder. "Hermione said she wanted to talk to Ron about something, and said for us to go on ahead. She said Flictwick will be following right behind her, so there's no need to wait up."

Wondering what they had to talk about, but not finding the request strange, Harry shrugged his shoulders and started up the path. Quidditch had been talked to death already that day, but he and Terry had a fascinating conversation about an advanced Arithmancy principle. Ginny listened quietly being slightly interested, but soon the level of theories made her eyes glaze over, and she moved up to the front of the group to talk with Natalie about something. For his part, Harry was proud he could hold his own in the conversation, although he couldn't recall nearly as much off the top of his head like Terry could. Still, he followed it enough, and by the time they crossed Hogwart's gates, Harry had a new idea he wanted to incorporate in his break down and attempted reversal of the Dementor spell he'd been working on.

Dinner was a quite affair, as most of the students were very hungry, yet very tired. So everyone ate quickly, wanting to get to bed and rest before another full week of classes. But something odd did happen...something that shocked Harry to his very core and threatened his sanity. Ron missed the meal.

"Hermione," Harry asked after the first plate of food appeared, but the redhead was still absent, "er...where's Ron?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably as she filled her tureen with soup and grabbed a dinner roll to dip in it. Then she said something that suspiciously sounded like, "He said he wasn't hungry."

Not believing he heard that right, but noticing his friends around him dropping their forks and becoming shocked with silence, Harry asked Hermione to repeat what she said, and she did with a bit of edge in her voice.

"Not hungry?" Ginny wondered. "We're talking about my brother Ron, right? The boy who had third helpings even when he got sick and turned green after the first time he rode a portkey. My brother who made my Mum return a purchase of Tupperware three years ago because he ate so much she never had any leftovers to put in it. He's never not hungry!"

Cursing under her breath, Hermione flung her spoon down on her plate and shot out of her seat, just pausing long enough to catch Harry around his wrist. Before he knew it, he was halfway out of the Great Hall, with a chicken drumstick still in his greasy hand. Another moment later, Hermione was pacing the empty Entrance Hall while Harry was searching his pockets for something to clean himself with. His napkin had been left tableside. Only finding his wand, he quickly conjured a towel, and turned his full attention to Hermione who was looking very flustered.

"What happened between you and Ron?" Harry asked, knowing there weren't too many possibilities that would have made Ron avoid a meal.

Hermione looked up in a panic, her hands nervously fiddling with the edges of her robes. Still she said nothing.

"Hermione," Harry tried again. "Terry said you stayed behind to talk with Ron about something on the walk back from Hogsmeade. What happened to Ron?"

This time he got more of a response than he planned on. Nearly at the end of her rope, Hermione threw her hands in the air and nearly shouted, "He did it again!"

Being so close to the school dance, and knowing his friends the way he did, Harry surmised what had happened and groaned in disbelief. He'd never hear the end of it.

"Everything was going fine Harry, everything," Hermione started her diatribe. "You and Ron aren't back to normal yet, but at least you're being polite once more. Classes are going well. There's not even been much bad news in the papers lately. A lot of people were expecting some sort of attack during the trip today, but it was perfectly lovely. And then Ron had to go and ruin everything by making the most asinine statement I've ever heard pass his lips."

Harry almost didn't ask, but knew he had to. Bracing himself, he worded to his friend, "What did he say?"

Stopping her pacing and looking Harry straight in the eyes, Hermione answered with exactly the answer he'd been dreading. But not even Harry would have thought Ron could be so blunt and callow about it.

"He asked," and Hermione stopped to shove her hands in her robes and do a fair impersonation of Ron, "So when you gonna ask me to this stupid dance, Hermione?"

Harry felt like banging his head against the wall. If he thought it would've done any good, he probably would have.

"Honestly Harry," Hermione continued, back to her pacing, "it's like all the progress towards maturity I thought he's made over the years just all disappeared. Does he just think I'm so bookish and boring that nobody might accept an invitation from me other than him? Does he think he's entitled to be my date, or something? And if he wanted to go with me, why did he wait so long to even hint at it? Harry, nobody waits until just a week before a dance to ask a partner out, not even you! Hell, what did he think I was buying dress robes for earlier today, if I hadn't already planned on attending?"

Harry was still considering bashing his head against the wall as he listened with growing horror, and made agreeing sounds in all the appropriate places. Hermione continued to rant for another few minutes until she calmed enough to at least listen to Harry.

“So...er, what did you tell him?” Harry didn’t know what else to ask.

As it turned out, Ron got more or less the same response from Hermione that Harry suffered through, but he didn’t take it lying down. Instead, he argued that it was Hermione’s fault for waiting so long until she asked him, and he didn’t believe her at first when she said she already had a date to the dance. Then Ron had stupidly brought up Krum; asking if he was portkeying into town for the occasion; and then Hermione had gotten really pissed and said no, she didn’t need for her date to be Victor, as most third years and above had more class and tact than Ron did. More insults were made. Ron called Hermione a tease, she called him immature. Finally, Ron escaped to the dorms (after a stop by the kitchens Harry was sure), and now Harry knew he was expected to clean up this mess no matter his precarious position with Ron these days.

After delaying returning to his dorm room as long as possible, Harry wasn’t surprised to find the room empty of Neville, Dean, and Seamus. Ron may have been spending less time with Harry that past year, but when it came to matters concerning Hermione, everything defaulted to him. They had history.

So finding himself sitting on the end of his bed once again, he knew he couldn’t put it off much longer. “Want to tell me about it?” Harry asked as delicately as he could put it.

Ron’s curtains were completely closed up around his bed, but Harry knew he wasn’t asleep yet. For one, if he was, Ron’s snoring would have been shaking the bedpost as it normally did. For another reason, Harry knew if he had had such a lousy day, he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep so early.

After a moment of silence, Ron spoke up from behind the still-closed off curtains.

"She's not going to the dance with me," he simply said. "I figured she was just waiting to tease me, and to get back at me for waiting too long back in forth year. But it's like she didn't even consider asking me. I thought things were better between us. But I guess I was wrong."

'You damn well sure were,' Harry felt like replying. But he knew that wouldn't accomplish anything, so instead he said, "Can I ask you a question without you blowing up in my face about it?"

Ron made a non-committed sound that Harry decided to take as an affirmation.

"Ron, how exactly have things gotten better between the two of you, which led you to believe Hermione would ask you to the dance?"

For all his blustering, Ron had no definite answer. He pointed out the fact that they had traded gifts for Christmas, but then Harry pointed out the fact that he'd even given Luna a gift that year. Ron made mention of the way they were constantly bickering with each other, and Harry showed him that they'd always done that, and loads of other people did as well. Finally Ron just admitted that he liked Hermione...had for a long time. And he just assumed that she reciprocated those same feelings. He thought that back during the Yule Ball she got so angry with him because she did like him, but he had been stupid and waited too long to ask her to the dance. This time around, he said he had been ready to ask her right away, except the rules had changed and he couldn't ask her, she had to ask him. It had thrown him for a loop, but he was sure she would. She hadn't, and Ron hadn't responded well to that. Harry decided not to bring up the muggle saying of "when you assume."

Realizing Harry hadn't even bothered to ask Hermione who she was attending the dance with, he asked Ron.

"Terry Boot," he spat. "Since when does Hermione even spend any time with him."

"A lot lately, Ron," Harry replied, not really surprised. "We've been at each other's throats for weeks, and instead of choosing between us

like she has in the past, Hermione's been spending a lot of time in the library. And I think even you know who else spends a lot of time in the library. Ravenclaws."

Outraged, and surprised that it hadn't come to Harry as big as a shock as it seemed to him, Ron threw open his curtains horrified.

"What!?"

"Ron," Harry explained painfully, "With the exception of the two of us, who else do you think Hermione spends her time with? Yeah, Ginny and this year Luna some, but usually only when we're around too. But when we're all off playing Quidditch, you don't think she sits alone in the common room waiting for us, do you? And that's a lot of time Ron, with all the practice we get in. Plus Hermione's got loads of advanced classes that we're not in, but other people are. I can't say I knew who Hermione asked to the Valentine's dance, but Terry doesn't surprise me. He's been her partner in Arithmancy class for three years now, and he usually studies with her in the library too. Haven't you noticed?"

By Ron's expression, Harry knew he had, but didn't want to admit to it.

"I don't want it to seem like we're ganging up on you or anything Ron," Harry continued, wading into dangerous territory, "but you've got to realize this is about both you and Hermione, not just you. And as much as you two have danced around each other and flirted the past few years, neither of you has made any move to claim the other. Maybe it's not too late, but maybe it is. The point is, you and Hermione don't have anything going on besides a normal friendship, and you can't be angry at her for asking another bloke to the dance. Disappointed yes, but not angry. Just like I need more personal space this year than before, it seems Hermione's needs are changing too. We're growing up, Ron. We're not kids anymore. And don't take this the wrong way, but it seems like you're just taking a little longer to mature than the rest of us. I want us to be good friends again, I really do. And I'm sure Hermione, once she calms down and you apologize, does too. But you've got to let go of us as you knew us as children, and learn to appreciate us as adults."

After that, Harry figured Ron would probably slug him again. Imagine his surprise when Ron simply nodded and remained silent.

Needing to say something after too long a silence between two males in the same room, Harry asked, “Is there anyone else who might ask you to the dance?”

Ron shrugged. “I got asked by a few girls, but I told them all no, waiting on Hermione. The last one was Sally-Anne Perks, and that was over a week ago. I hear she asked someone else the next day.”

“What about one of Ginny’s dorm mates,” Harry wondered, thinking he was being helpful.

“Nah,” Ron returned, “I don’t like any of them much anyway, and I’m sure everybody worth going with already has a date. Maybe someone really shy, like a Hufflepuff? Does Hannah Abbot or Megan Jones have a date yet?”

Harry sadly told him yes, they both did.

“What about that curvy fifth year you patrol with? She can’t have found a date yet.”

Harry bristled on behalf of Cami for being called “curvy,” and privately thought Ron would be all wrong for her anyways, but it didn’t matter. “She’s going with Neville.”

“Neville!” Ron gaped. “How’s she even know him?”

Harry shrugged. “We were patrolling one night after the dance was announced, and Cami asked me to describe some blokes from the D.A. She didn’t want to ask anyone from Hufflepuff, so I just named some names, and she asked questions. She likes Herbology too, so I guess he sounded nice to her.”

“But Neville?”

Harry just glared at Ron, making his point.

“Sorry,” Ron apologized.

“Maybe Pansy needs a date, since she’s not going with Malfoy?” Harry tried after another long pause.

“Shut it,” Ron growled, with a hint of a smile on his face.

“There’s also Millicent?”

“It’s got to be a girl Harry, remember?” Ron quipped.

“Oh yeah,” Harry wondered, “maybe someone should tell her.”

And just like that, Harry and Ron were back to being better friends. Not as good as they used to be, but much closer than just an hour before. They both knew, no matter if Ron found a date or not, it was all going to be alright.

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With his personal problems on the mend, and the school dance fast approaching, Harry soon found it was high time to get his plan in motion for how to deal with Voldemort’s planned “party crashing.” Watching the vision over and over again in his pensieve, Harry came to some basic conclusions. First off, Lucius Malfoy, along with the help from Mulciber, Nott, and Warrington, would lead an undetermined number of new recruited Death Eaters in a frontal attack on Hogwarts, as a diversion. As that happened, Voldemort himself would likely show at Hogwarts as well, but unattached to the others. Possibly trying to sneak past the wards. And as for Bellatrix, Harry had no clue. Maybe she’d attack another target, to further detract aurors and the Order away from Hogwarts, or maybe she’d show in a frilly pink taffeta gown, wanting to attend the dance herself. Harry figured she was crazy enough.

If it was only the Death Eaters by themselves, Harry was pretty certain he could handle them alone. Not in a group of course; he had no delusions he was that skilled; but so far his method of picking off the enemy one by one seemed to be working just fine. As far as Lestrange went, Harry figured there was nothing much he could do,

seeing as he had no idea what task Voldemort had assigned her. It was Voldemort himself however, that posed to be the big problem. Harry knew in no way was he ready to face the dark wizard. That confrontation was his final goal, and although he'd come far in such a short time in increasing his skills as a fighter and repertoire of spells, he still had a long way to go. Harry wasn't about to commit suicide.

Because of Voldemort alone, Harry knew he had to tell Dumbledore. Only he could really deal with him, and if Voldemort was planning on breaching the wards around Hogwarts, Harry knew it was his responsibility to tell the Headmaster with so many students at risk.

But Harry didn't want to be taken out of the action. He could still be of help he knew. More help than many of the Order members in fact. He had a trunk full of criminals to prove it. Prisoners he'd captured using skill, luck, cunning, and stealth. More of Harry's Slytherin qualities to be sure, than the bold and straightforward traits of his own house. Slytherins could be dead useful he knew...

And just like that, Harry had an idea! Running back to his trunk after class Wednesday afternoon, Harry threw open his trunk, grabbed a vial of Veritaserum, and entered his trunk's final compartment. The one full of Death Eaters.

He had only one question, but taking the time to truss up each of them, stun them, administer the truth serum, enervate them, and ask it was lengthy. So starting with the most likely candidates; those who knew Lucius Malfoy the least, but were still considered important in the Death Eater ranks; Harry asked his question.

“Would Lucius Malfoy be able to recognize your handwriting?”

After three tries, he finally got the answer he wanted.

“No,” replied Jugson.

To be sure Harry asked a few more questions, and found it to be true. Jugson was much older than the senior Malfoy, and therefore they had not attended Hogwarts together. Spending twelve years in Azkaban further distanced Jugson. And while the two men knew

much about each other through associates, they'd rarely had dealings themselves.

With that bit of good news, Harry exited his trunk and sat down to write a letter.

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Malfoy,

I can only imaging how desperate you are to find me and the others. How has our Lord taken our absence? Not too well, I imagine. It is not desertion as you might think, as there is much we have discovered that you should know. If you want to find out more, meet me Thursday night at the Hog's Head pub at eleven, and come alone. You will have the chance to ask your questions, and maybe become enlightened as well.

Jugson

P.S. It wouldn't surprise me if you wanted to flee with us after learning what we know. Just to be safe, I suggest you put your affairs in order before we meet. Crabbe and Goyle say hello.

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Harry hadn't a clue how Death Eaters may write to one another, but he ran the note past the real Jugson, and found it was acceptable. It didn't matter. No matter how suspicious it was, Harry knew Lucius was too desperate to find answers to pass on the chance. Voldemort was getting impatient with no news, and the letter had hinted at too much for Malfoy to ignore. Harry also thought the personal touch mentioning Crabbe and Goyle was very funny.

Using a portkey to escape Hogwarts, and then apparating to the Diagon Alley post office, Harry rented a fast owl and sent it off before he could change his mind. Using Hedwig was out of the question, and the school owls were too recognizable. But considering the meeting would be in town, Harry didn't think he risked anything even if the owl could be traced. Malfoy would still show.

The next night after curfew, Harry quietly got dressed in his full Dragon hide outfit, minus the cloak, and wore a plain black robe over it all. Securing his bed curtains closed while his roommates were in the bathroom or already in bed themselves, he knew he wouldn't be discovered till morning. He didn't expect to encounter any trouble that night, but had learned to be cautious just in case. If things went smoothly, he wouldn't even break a sweat, and would be back in bed in a few short hours. If not, well, than at least Harry knew he'd be prepared. With a final check to make sure he had both wands on him, his dagger, a small flask in his hip pocket, and an emergency portkey, Harry made his way out of the castle and towards the sleepy town of Hogsmeade. It was just after ten, and he had almost an hour to reach the bar and look around.

Being late, but not that late, there were a few other places still open and occupied. The Three Broomsticks looked to be as busy as ever, and Harry noticed through the window that Madame Rosmerta's shirt was cut much lower than the ones she wore on Hogsmeade weekends. The post office still had its lights on and a few people in the lobby, as did Gladrags for some strange reason. Trying to not be too conspicuous, Harry made his way casually over to the Hog's Head Pub. After another twenty minutes, Harry was finally satisfied he wasn't being followed, and there weren't any sentry posts around the bar. Taking a swig of the polyjuice from his flask, under the hooded cloak he wore his features slowly shifted to those of another. With so much recent practice imbibing the foul potion, Harry hardly shuddered.

Walking into the bar was a different experience than Harry's single other time there. Then, it had been a Hogsmeade weekend, and the bunch of schoolchildren had stuck out like a sore thumb. Now however, Harry was just one more darkly dressed stranger in a room full of them. In fact, except for the occasional hag and goblin in the corner, the room was packed with black cloaked witches and wizards. Harry chose eleven at night because he didn't want the place to be empty, but ideally he would have liked a little more privacy.

Finding a small table barely large enough for him to sit at, Harry considered himself lucky he found one at all. When the wench came

up to ask him his drink, he ordered a Firewhiskey, even though he had no intention of drinking it. Being pissed wouldn't help the situation any. As soon as she delivered it (leaning over much too far to be a coincidence), Harry paid for the drink with a hefty tip. The moment she turned her back, he spilt half the drink on the mucky floor. At least now it would look like he had drank some of the amber liquid.

With his hood up and his hands cradling the partially filled glass, Harry's intentions were quite clear that he wanted to be left alone, and was not interrupted. And before he knew it, it was five minutes until eleven, and using his special lens, Harry could see through the walls of the dingy pub that Lucius Malfoy had arrived, and was circling the building much as Harry himself had. Surprisingly though, he was by himself, and hadn't told anyone of the letter and brought support. Not only could Harry not see anyone else outside besides Malfoy, but his multifunction watch wasn't picking up the magical signature from any Dark Marks inside the bar either. Harry was almost positive Lucius would have attempted to grab Jugson, rather than meet with him as proposed. Apparently not.

At the exact moment the crooked clock on the wall struck the hour, the pub's door slammed open and in walked Malfoy. He, like most everyone else, wore a black cloak with the hood raised, but Harry thought it must have been the shiniest, most pristine black he'd ever seen. With a sneer on his face Malfoy searched the room, and Harry raised his glass and made a shuffling sound with his feet to get his attention. The barest raise of his head displayed his face under the hood, and without preamble Malfoy headed his way.

On the surface, Harry was calm and collected, reclined back slightly in the chair and with the whiskey tumbler in his right hand. Underneath though, he was taunt and ready with his watch's shield engaged, his wand in his left hand beneath the table, and an emergency portkey worn around his neck, ready to be activated with a spoken word.

The two didn't say anything as Lucius seated himself in the already crowded space, but he did waive the wench away as she began to head over to take his order. Harry didn't know if he refused a drink because he was here on business, or he couldn't lower his standards

enough to drink from a dirty glass. Judging from the sneer on his face, probably a bit of both.

“Jugson,” Malfoy greeted him, “you’ve been most difficult to find.”

“Lucius,” Harry drawled back, shaking with anticipation, “soon you will be as well.”

Malfoy barely had a moment to realize what was said before Harry quietly whispered the incantation to his personal stunning spell. “*Stubefy*.”

Under the table the spell didn’t have far to travel, but unlike what he’d been expecting, Malfoy didn’t collapse onto the table. Instead his eyes shot open in surprise as a shimmering blue shield flared up around him to intercept the spell.

‘Damn,’ Harry realized, ‘Malfoy must have a shield up.’ It was similar to his watch’s.

The look in Malfoy’s eyes turned from surprise to anger and rage in a fraction of a second, and quicker than Harry would have suspected, his hand shot to his cane, about to draw the wand Harry knew resided inside. Luckily however, Harry already had his wand drawn and pointed, and the cluttered area slowed Malfoy down enough where he never had a chance.

“*Stubefy!*” This time, there wasn’t a shield to impede his spell, and Lucius Malfoy slumped down headfirst on the worn wooden table with a small thunk. Harry figured he’d have to grab onto the Death Eater and use his portkey to escape, but amazingly enough, the noise and general atmosphere of the seedy pub hadn’t noticed a man being stunned. Hadn’t noticed, or hadn’t cared. Either way, Harry counted his blessings, and quickly made to leave. Dumping the rest of his drink on top of Malfoy’s head, he walked the taller man towards the door. It was difficult to carry the dead weight, but to the rest of the room it looked and smelled like just another drunk being escorted home. Same as any other night.

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The next morning, it was hard for Harry to sit through Arithmancy after such a successful capture. But as it was his only class, and he had the rest of the day to interrogate Malfoy, somehow he managed. Getting back into the castle and securing Malfoy in his trunk had been easy enough the night before, and Harry had managed that, plus stripping Malfoy of two wands, three portkeys, and a vial of poison all before the polyjuice had worn off.

Once lunch was over, where Harry had barely managed to eat a thing, he practically ran back upstairs to his dorm, not wanting to wait another moment. The brief moment during lunch when he hadn't been thinking about Lucius, was when Draco received a letter, and bragged to everyone within hearing distance that his father had just purchased a controlling interest in the Kenmare Kestrels, a fairly decent professional Quidditch team. With an evil thought, Harry silently wished Draco congratulations on his good fortune. It would probably be the last letter from his father he'd ever receive.

Not being able to help himself, Harry couldn't just jump straight to the interrogation with Lucius Malfoy like he had already with so many others of his captured Death Eaters. Much like he had months ago with Sean Hazelton, Harry toyed with him a little. It was just too good a chance to pass up.

And the look on Malfoy's face was priceless after he'd been chained to a wall by an unseen force, and the thick oak door that symbolized his imprisonment opened up to admit of all people, Harry Potter, who admitted to abducting him outside any lawful authority, and without any aide whatsoever. For a brief moment Malfoy forgot all pretence of good breeding and civility, and struggled against his chains, kicking and screaming while spouting obscenities from his mouth. Only moments passed before Lucius realized he wasn't accomplishing anything, other than to entertain Harry, who was smiling and laughing from his safe position near the door. After that he stopped his futile efforts...but if looks could kill. Harry doubted anyone in all of England had more hate than the man before him at that moment.

Malfoy refused to eat the drugged food, obviously having more sense than Hazelton the previous time Harry had tried it. Shrugging, and not

really caring, Harry just stunned him, and signaled Dobby to open the door. Not wanting to take any chances, Harry had lately had Dobby standing guard outside the cells whenever he was talking to one of his prisoners. After deeming the situation safe, Dobby let Harry exit, and Malfoy got fed three drops of Veritaserum in the usual manner. When he was awakened, it looked like he might briefly throw off the potion's effects, but that only lasted a moment before he succumbed to the inevitable.

Hours later, and Harry had only scratched the surface. Malfoy was the proverbial jackpot! Not only had he numerous crimes, plans, and secrets to admit to on his own behalf, but as one of Voldemort's most trusted and capable Death Eaters, he was well aware of hordes of other valuable information. Locations of the houses of other known and suspected Death Eaters, the state of their finances, past plans that had failed over the years, as well as future ones that hadn't been tried yet. He knew of some of Voldemort's immediate goals, as well as of his long term ones. In fact, with the exception of perhaps Bellatrix Lestrange, Malfoy was confident that he knew more than anyone except Voldemort himself.

But most of that information could wait for another time. That night, Harry was most concerned with the state of Lucius's own finances (to rid him of them), and whatever firm plans had been laid for the day after; the night of the dance. Harry was happy to learn that Malfoy had taken his advice to consolidate most of his assets, and a short trip to Gringotts would be all it would take to gain control of most of the Malfoy fortune. As for the next night, Malfoy had been told little else since the night Harry had had his vision, and the only new information he learned were the identities of the new recruits who'd accompany Malfoy, Nott, Warrington, and Mulciber, and the time and location of their meeting. It would be at the abandoned World Cup Stadium; left standing but not used in two years; at four in the afternoon, three hours before the dance would start. Knowing he had to continue another day after processing what he'd already heard, Harry left Malfoy late that night, anxious for the next day. He'd have to get a good night's rest, for he'd possibly soon be facing Voldemort.

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The hectic nature of the following day more or less meant that besides last minute preparations for the dance, nobody did much of anything else. The staff were all tasked with decorating the Great Hall and arranging activities for the younger students who wouldn't be attending, the female population of the castle started to do each other's hair and make-up the second lunch ended, and as for the males, well, they just tried to stay out of the way and not get into any trouble.

Originally planning on just showing up at the arranged meeting place with his dragon armor, a wand, and a lot of bravado, Harry thought he could take out the Death Eaters planning on attacking Hogwarts one by one as they showed up individually. But when he'd been planning that, Harry assumed that he'd only be dealing with a handful of people. After all, if they were only a distraction from whatever Voldemort really had in mind, Harry didn't think he would allocate so many of his troops. His conversation with Lucius Malfoy the previous day had enlightened him about the falsehood of that assumption. Besides Malfoy who was officially in charge, and Warrington, Mulciber, and Nott who were to assist him, Harry had discovered a full dozen newly recruited Death Eaters were assigned to the task, instead of the three or four that Harry had speculated on. There was no way Harry could take on so many by himself. Even if he were to enlist Remus's help, he doubted they'd be much of a match. Since Neville knew the most of Harry's extracurricular activities, he'd possibly choose to help if asked, but Harry didn't want that. He'd be putting himself at great risk in a few hours, and no matter the amounts of improvements Neville had shown in his abilities the past year, Harry couldn't ask him to take such a huge chance.

Fortunately, having limited time before he had to act, Harry was forced to think outside the box, and he came up with a viable alternative to picking the Death Eaters off one by one as he preferred. There was a certain artifact Harry had in his possession that could greatly aide him in taking out so many enemies at once, and Harry mentally smacked himself in the head that he hadn't thought of using it before.

However, it would take time to retrieve, and with only two hours until the planned meeting time of four o'clock, Harry knew he had to hurry. But first, there was something he had to do.

"Ice Mice," Harry spoke, and the stone gargoyle moved aside. Clearing his mind of anything that could tip his hand, Harry proceeded up the steps to the Headmaster's office.

"Come in, Harry," he heard after only knocking once.

Entering the circular office, Harry wasn't surprised to find Snape there too, being informed of his presence by the tingling his watch gave off. Usually Harry distanced himself from Snape enough so that he hardly felt the thing, but anywhere within a twenty foot circumference was sure to alert him of any Dark Mark presence. Not expected however, were Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout. It seemed Harry had walked in on a meeting of all the house heads.

"Er, sorry sir," Harry apologized, "I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

Dumbledore just smiled. "That's quite alright Harry. I daresay these weekly meetings of ours aren't the most exciting of events, and could use the occasional interruption once in awhile. What do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

Snape huffed in his corner, and Harry was pleased to see McGonagall cast him a disapproving look, so didn't feel the need to respond himself. For a moment he wondered if he should ask to speak with Dumbledore in private. Snape and his own head of house would probably be kept informed of his news, but Harry really never considered before just how much information Dumbledore shared with Flitwick and Sprout. They'd never been part of the Order of the Phoenix as much as Harry knew, and while the news he wanted to share wasn't so secret to take drastic precautions, it definitely pertained outside of normal school matters.

Deciding to just state his business; if only to see Professor Flitwick and Sprout's reactions; Harry simply told them.

"Not much, Professor. I've just been feeling a little anxious today, and thought you'd like to know."

"There's a school dance beginning in a few hours, Potter," Snape sneered. This was the first time the two had talked since Harry had broken his wand, and it was obvious the older man hadn't forgotten it. "I hardly think a little trepidation on your part warrants a personal report to the Headmaster."

Not taking the time to think, Harry snapped back, "Well, I also wanted to find some hair gel, Professor. Think I could borrow some?"

Snape's eyes got wide with the insult, but before he could take all of Gryffindor's points away, Professor McGonagall piped in.

"Mr. Potter," she exclaimed, "that will be ten points from Gryffindor, and you owe Professor Snape an apology."

Not wanting to give the man anything, but knowing he couldn't get away without it, Harry mumbled his apology after a moment of tension. Snape looked like he was about to assign a detention for being insincere, so Harry turned to face Dumbledore and continued to share what he had come to.

"What I meant to say Professor," Harry looked at Snape, "was that I've been feeling anxious all day, but the feeling's not my own."

That had the desired effect on the room, and by the way Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up under his wizard hat, Harry knew he had made himself clear this time. It was the truth too, as Harry really was feeling the overflow of Voldemort's emotions, no matter how much he tried to ignore them.

"It's just like this past Christmas, sir. Voldemort's feeling very excited about something, and with a school dance about to happen, based on muggle traditions, I thought you ought to know. In fact, I'd say the emotions are the strongest I've felt since I began using Occlumency. If I had to guess, Voldemort's planning to take part personally in whatever's going to take place." Given the circumstances, Harry didn't think he could give them any better a warning than that.

Flitwick squeaked with worry in his large chair, and Harry overheard Sprout say "Oh my" in hushed undertones. Snape and McGonagall however took the news with a grain of salt, and turned to gauge Dumbledore's reaction, to see how much of a threat they should take the news.

As for Dumbledore himself, he just steepled his fingers for a long moment before turning his attention to some of the silver instruments he had about the room. Harry still had no idea what any of them were, or what they did, and vowed one day to find out.

"Is there anything else you feel is pertinent, Harry?" He asked after a time. "Any rumors around the school perhaps, or unusual activities that have slipped the staff's notice?"

Besides what he was hiding himself, no, Harry hadn't noticed anything strange, and said as much.

"What about you, Serverus? I know you're not as trusted by certain parents as you once were, but have you heard any news about a possible action that might soon be taking place?"

Snape looked extremely uncomfortable reporting on his spying activities with Harry present, but no one could fault his dedication to Dumbledore, and the potion master swallowed his pride.

"Since the Dark Lord's public return, my...former...associates have been much less willing to talk with me than in years past. They are still under the impression that I sympathize with their cause, but my history of turning spy for you has kept them suspect. Luckily I've not been totally ostracized, as many Death Eaters cut deals and named names to avoid Azkaban, and that has helped. Plus, arrogance is a major fault of most wizards," and Snape paused dramatically to look at Harry, "and occasionally I overhear bragging about news from a drunk or imbecile wizard that should know better and keep his mouth shut."

Harry always wondered how effective Snape's spying could be since it was obvious he turned sides over a decade ago. It wasn't like he donned a mask and attended regular meetings. Voldemort would have skinned him alive, and used him as a potion ingredient. But by associating with the parents of his Slytherin students, it seemed Snape still had a unique way to contribute to the cause.

"I've not heard any news about an attack if that's what you're implying Potter," he continued, "but then again I knew nothing about those that occurred over the holidays. The only news worthy of sharing I'm aware of, is that many known Death Eaters and a fair amount of recent Hogwarts graduates have not been seen in a number of weeks. Rumor has it they're either on the run, wanting to avoid both sides of the upcoming conflicts, or are in seclusion undergoing advanced training for a special mission that's been tasked to them. If we are to believe Potter's outburst, then it seems the latter to be more likely."

Well, now Harry knew not only Voldemort had been noticing the missing Death Eaters. With a good number of them being high profile citizens of Magical England, it wasn't a great surprise. But Harry congratulated himself on learning a little new info; Snape's report as well as of the fact that while not part of the Order, Flitwick and Sprout were at least trusted enough by Dumbledore to not be excluded from such news. Unlike the year before, now Harry knew if the Headmaster, Snape, and McGonagall were unreachable, he had other people with whom to trust.

Shortly after, Harry was dismissed, not having another reason to be there. On his way out however, he managed to overhear Dumbledore's final comment. "Well, it appears we have more matters to discuss before we adjourn. It seems we'll need a security detail for later tonight. Any ideas?"

As Harry made his way down the steps, he left the security of Hogwarts and Voldemort's intentions in the hands of his professors. Harry's mind was elsewhere, and now that he had informed Dumbledore of his vision (in a roundabout way), he rushed back to his room to get prepared much as he did the night before. Once again dressed in dragon hide, armed with portkeys, polyjuice potion, and his weapons, not fifteen minutes after leaving the Headmaster's office

Harry found himself in his Hideaway, making towards the west wing of the flat. Other than his many guest rooms, the wing didn't contain much else; except for his motorcycle.

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"Warrington," Nott asked, after arriving early and checking the surrounding area to make sure it was secure, "do you know what this meeting Lucius called for is about?"

"No," he replied seething. "I was only informed of it a short while ago, and Lucius would tell me nothing. But with this many of us," he continued excitedly, gesturing to the dozen new recruits, "I expect we'll be involved in a major confrontation."

Nearby the twelve younger Death Eaters whispered among themselves eagerly. The majority of them had just been initiated that past summer, and with the exception of that night, had only made one or two small attacks over the holidays. Voldemort was still content to let the Dementors under his control do the majority of his terrorizing, while his new troops trained and kept under the radar. And while the Ministry's emergency portkey program was a large irritant that allowed most attacked wizards to escape, the muggle casualties were still plentiful enough to keep both he and the Dementors satisfied. For the moment.

"What about you, Mulciber?" Of the senior Death Eaters, Mulciber was the most quiet of them all, and therefore was often forgotten about or overlooked. Unlike the others, he didn't feel the need to brag and gloat about his wealth or family stock. That proved to be advantageous as he often blended in with the background, and overheard much he wasn't supposed to. As a former housemate and good friend to Mulciber, Nott knew all this and more, and was one of the few to take advantage of his friend's talents.

"Same as you three, I wasn't told anything except where and when to be here." Taking a small pause, he smiled when he added, "I did however notice, that our Lord had been fidgeting the past many days, and he is not one to normally fidget. Taking into account other hints I've picked up, I would hazard to guess that you are correct. Tonight

we will not be terrorizing muggles or escorting the Dementors. There will be a mighty undertaking. I'd further guess that the Dark Lord himself will be present, so we all should be performing to our full potential."

Nott and Warrington didn't need to be told that. Although they too suspected that Voldemort himself would be involved somehow, the statement about performing was more for the benefit of the new recruits. Tonight was not a night to second guess yourselves and use school-taught and Ministry sanctioned spells. If there was ever a time to unleash the Unforgiveables, it was when their Master was present.

With that said, there was nothing more to do than stand around and wait for Malfoy to arrive. It was only moments until the meeting time, and as Lucius Malfoy was one of the most punctual people they knew of, their questions about the night's activities would soon be answered.

Meanwhile, from high in the sky under silencing and invisibilities spells, Harry observed all of this as he mentally steeled himself for action. He had had to fly his Indian Chief at near top speed to make the abandoned Quidditch Stadium in time, and his adrenaline was already pumping so high Harry wanted to make sure he wasn't forgetting something important before he launched off into his dubious plan.

Originally planned as he was flying, Harry figured he'd just hover over the group and stun them all either with his wand, or the built-in stunning switch that Sirius had incorporated with the bike. It was the one and only offensive spell powered by the small, yet very powerful dragon heart, and Harry was looking forward to not only capturing so many Death Eaters, but seeing how it handled in a real life situation. But that got ruled out almost immediately, as Harry spied the large group. There were way too many of them to stun individually. By the time Harry managed to get off a handful of spells, he'd have half a dozen others zeroing in on him. And as for the built in stunner, well, Harry had no idea just how powerful it was. Yes, it was certainly more powerful than any wizard could cast with a wand. But did that mean the spell's radius would be larger? Would the spell travel faster? And just how many people could it stun at once?

Not knowing the answer to any of those questions, Harry drank a dose from the polyjuice flask in his hip pocket. ‘Ugh,’ Harry shuddered to himself, ‘Malfoy tastes horrible!’ As it was taking effect, he maneuvered the motorcycle a good distance away from the group and left it under its invisibility spell. Then, taking note of its position by the prints left in the soft earth, Harry left the confines of the invisibility spell and approached the group. Because of his stealthy approach, none of the Death Eaters even noticed him until Harry walked upon them, only fifteen feet from the bulk of the group.

“Malfoy, that you?” Warrington called out.

Harry raised his head and gave his best Lucius sneer. Not wanting to say much to risk his discovery, he however knew what the real Malfoy’s response would be.

“If you were doing your jobs,” he yelled out, “you wouldn’t have to ask that, now would you?”

The newer Death Eaters looked properly admonished, while Warrington and the others just waived the remark off and walked to meet the man. As planned, it was just four o’clock

‘So Lucius,’ Nott asked once the group was together, “what do we have planned this evening.” The others around him looked interested as well. Only Nott, Warrington, and Mulciber knew that a mission was planned that night (even if they didn’t know what it was), but the others weren’t stupid. With so many of them in one place, they knew something was going down.

Nervous as hell but doing his best not to show it, Harry turned his back on the group and called back over his shoulder, “Follow me.” Neither of his wands nor his dagger was drawn, but Harry had his portkey once again around his neck, and with the simple spoken phrase “extract,” he’d be safe back in the comforts of his Hideaway.

With the others behind him, Harry was the first to reach his bike, and approached the left side with caution. Before the others could walk into it, he flipped off the Invisibility spell and gripped the handle bars

with nervous excitement, while the others gasped aloud at the sudden appearance of the obviously muggle machine.

“What the bloody hell is that?” one of the newbies exclaimed.

There was some grumbling agreement, as most of the purebloods had never seen a motorcycle before. One apparently had though, and his guard immediately went up.

“What are you playing at, Malfoy?” Mulciber’s eyes were wide already, looking around suspiciously. His hand had too, Harry saw, crept beneath the sleeve of his cloak. While not yet pointing his wand, he was moments away from doing so. Not every Death Eater was as dim as he’d thought, Harry noted.

After a mental stumble of what to say, Harry decided to speak. Either this would work, and he’d be home in a matter of hours, or it wouldn’t, and he’d be in the fight of his life. Either way, as Harry’s borrowed features began to talk, he too was inching towards his wand, ready for anything.

“Relax Mulciber,” the voice of Lucius Malfoy grated on his ears, “this is all part of our Master’s plans.” It was the first time Harry had ever referred to Voldemort as anything with the barest amount of respect, and it further made him sick.

“But that’s a...”

“I know what it is, you fool. I was the one who procured it! For those of you not in the know, this is a mudblood motor vehicle, used for transportation and recreation. Serves muggles the same way broomsticks do for us. Albeit, this motorbike,” Harry managed to say the word with a sneer, “is dramatically less efficient in both regards. We will infiltrate the grounds surrounding Hogwarts with this, as any unsuspecting watchers will think us a lost bunch of muggles. Not a great stretch of the imagination, that.” Harry was taken aback when his slanderous comment garnered some laughter. Perhaps he had gotten a little too good at pretending to be dark.

"There's no way we'd all fit on that thing," someone from the back spoke up. Apparently, they had figured out what the seat was for. One, Harry was amused to see, was longingly stroking the leather of the padded seat as he compared it to the splintery wooden length most broomsticks relied on. Score one for the muggles, Harry mentally ticked off.

"How wise of you to notice," Harry managed to reply with a bored, condescending tone. "That's why this bike has been magically altered. Gather around and I'll show you."

As the men all encircled the bike, Harry knew the most critical part of his plan was about to occur. He had to convincingly mount the bike in the guise of Lucius Malfoy, and get everyone of the fifteen men as close to the bike as possible. He had no idea of the effective radius of the stunner he was about to use, but one thing was clear. Harry had to be sitting on the seat when he enacted it, or he too would be knocked out with the magical attack. And then, as the odds he'd wake up first of the more than a dozen men were slim, he'd be royally screwed.

But mount the bike he did with a small flourish to throw his black cloak over the leather saddlebags, and as hoped the gathered men all packed in as close as possible to see the magical alterations Harry, as Malfoy, had hinted at. They never got the chance though. For as soon as Harry had a comfortable seat, he fingered the red button, noticing more than a single pair of eyes carefully trained on him. However, they didn't know his bike was powered by an entire dragon's heart. They never stood a chance!

Hopping he'd still be alive in a moment, Harry pushed the red button that engaged the bike's stunner with his left hand, all while drawing his wand in case things went bad with his right. With his mind so occupied with all that could go wrong, it was a good thing instead of immediately releasing the button, he instead held it down. For three Death Eaters, Mulciber, Warrington, and surprisingly one of the new recruits, all had personal shielding devices much like he, and the real Lucius Malfoy owned. But by holding the button down, Harry had unknowingly sustained the stunning field powered by the Ironbelly's heart much longer than a spell even Dumbledore or Voldemort could

have cast. So with a shocked expression, those three too fell unconscious after their shields had briefly flared to life, and then were overcome by the stronger magics of Harry's bike. They may have been the last to fall, but ultimately it didn't matter. All fifteen men lay helpless on the cold, hard ground.

"Well," Harry remarked in a characteristically un-Malfoy like squeak, "I guess that worked."

After that, it only took moments for Harry to additionally stun each man with his own personal stunner (can't be too safe,) enlarge his trunk from one of the bike's saddle bags, and load the men into the last compartment reserved especially for them. Not wanting to miss even the beginning of the school dance, Harry didn't take the time to relieve them of any belongings or further secure them in cells. That would take far too long, and he was confident his personal stunner, after so many successful trials, would hold until he returned. And in another moment, Harry was once again airborne, flying back to his flat in London. If he had bothered to look at his watch at all, even Harry would have been surprised to learn he'd been on the ground for less than ten minutes. Not bad for fifteen captured murderers.

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The Great Hall was splendidly decorated in clashing hues of pink and red hours later as Harry made his way to the punch bowl to quench his thirst. Only a few others had joined him so early, as most of the female students were taking every moment allotted them to prepare for the dance. He himself would have waited for his friends, not to mention his date, in the Gryffindor common room with the other boys, but had let Neville talk him into walking with him to meet Cami outside the Hufflepuff common room entrance. After sending an eager second year girl up the stairs to check if that was alright with Hermione and Ginny, and waiting the few moments it took her to fall back down the stairs with an affirmative answer, Harry had agreed. He realized that neither Cami nor Neville knew each other well, and neither of them was very outgoing either. But once they got over their initial shyness, they had adjourned to a quiet corner to talk about Herbology, and left Harry alone. Which is how he found himself in his charcoal grey dress robes, eying the bubbling punch bowl

suspiciously, and settling for a cold goblet of water instead. Fred and George may no longer be around to worry about, but enough of their products were bought by others. Harry decided to play it safe.

Soon enough others started to enter the large room, and before he knew it, Harry was in the middle of a mob of people, all “oohing” and “ahhing” over the decorations. It did look nice, Harry supposed, if one were to look pass the clash of colors. The room was set up much like the Yule Ball had been his fourth year, with smaller round tables rather than the four long house ones. Harry had already claimed one for he and his friends, and the fact that it was near buffet tables (to appease Ron if he showed), near the dance floor (to please the girls), and near an exit (to satisfy him if the need should arise to escape quickly) had much to do with it.

Near the time Neville and Cami returned to the table to sit down, Harry could tell things were about to officially start. Most of the professors saddled with chaperoning duty were already present, and the room was near-filled with shiny dresses and sleek new robes. Harry hadn’t spotted Ron yet, but had seen Hermione in a lovely looking shade of crimson heading over to a group of Ravenclaws, no doubt looking for her own date. Which reminded him...

“Looking for someone special?” A voice behind him asked. Harry didn’t know if it was the sudden spin, or finding Ginny looking drop-dead gorgeous in a rich green strapless dress, but suddenly he was feeling a little light headed.

It took him a moment to clear the cotton out of his head, but Harry finally managed to respond. “Looking for you, actually. Neville and Cami seem to be hitting it off, and I’ve been waiting for some time now.”

“Ahhh,” Ginny pouted in exaggeration, which failed after about three seconds when she broke out with a radiant smile, “I hope you weren’t waiting too long.”

The smile caught him off guard, and Harry for the first time took in Ginny’s whole appearance, giving her the up and down. He didn’t

linger like a pervert though, and further avoided a Weasley tirade when he blurted out, “Ginny, you look beautiful.”

It was because it was so unplanned; so sincere; so utterly Harry, that Ginny had to choke back a gasp as she thanked him. She'd be waiting years for him to say that. And even if they were closer to friends now than anything else, she'd still take what she could get.

“Here,” she said nervously as she brought out a small package from behind her back, “this is for you. I know it’s kinda old fashioned, but Mum said it’d be proper for a dance like this.” With that she opened the lid on the small carton, and lifted out a cream colored rose wrapped with baby’s breath. Harry frowned for the briefest of moments when they were both interrupted by Hermione.

“It’s very appropriate, Ginny. If men can give women corsages during a formal date or dance, then there’s no reason we can’t give men a boutonnière at a Sadie Hawkins dance.” After her interruption, Harry immediately figured out what the rose was, and erased the confused expression on his face. Sometimes, Hermione’s interruptions weren’t all that unwelcome.

“Hello Hermione,” Harry greeted her with a hug, “you look very pretty tonight.”

Hermione looked shocked at how grown-up Harry was acting, but took the compliment to heart and replied with her own. She also added a small kiss to his cheek as had become customary between them at appropriate times.

“Hey Terry,” Harry also greeted Hermione’s date, who was standing shyly slightly behind her. With the exception of class discussions and the D.A., Harry had never really had a lengthy conversation with him. But he liked Terry just fine.

“Hey Harry. Nice robes, I’ve never seen that color before.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied awkwardly. “Oh,” he added, turning to Ginny, “before I forget. This is for you.”

Harry too made a motion like he was about to bring something from behind his back, but instead presented Ginny with an empty hand. She looked confused with a small hint of disappointment, until Harry brought up his other hand which already had his wand in it.

With a few mumbled words, Harry had managed to conjure an exotic orchid, colored a shade of green only slightly lighter than Ginny's dress. After stowing his wand, he managed to attach it to her wrist with the included band with only minimal help.

Ginny looked delighted at the gesture, while Hermione looked a bit envious. Terry suddenly felt an ass, and quickly conjured a rose for Hermione. It was nothing as unique, but he did get the color to match her dress. Hermione was thrilled with the corsage, even if it was an afterthought, and let Terry pin it to her dress with a blush.

"Thanks Terry, it's lovely." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek too, which surprised Harry most of all. He knew he, Ron, and occasionally Neville received such affection from Hermione, but he didn't think Hermione's relationship with Terry had progressed that far. Judging from the confidence in which she delivered the kiss, he was wrong. That wasn't Terry's first kiss from Hermione. Curious.

"Merlin Granger," Pansy Parkinson spoke as suddenly as she arrived on the scene, "couldn't you have done something with your hair for once?"

Hermione's hair looked fine in a delicate French twist, with no trace of the bushiness she'd displayed in her youth. But Pansy was only looking to insult, and knew right where to prod Hermione. Turning red from embarrassment, Hermione's hands came up to inspect her hair, but were gently forced back down by Terry, who had stepped in to defend her honor just a moment before Harry had planned to.

"Merlin Parkinson, couldn't you have done something with your nose for once?"

His insult, Harry admitted, was also better than anything he would have come up with.

This time it was Pansy's hands that came up to inspect her nose, and whose face flushed red from either embarrassment or anger. Turning to her date for support was a mistake as well. Because unlike Terry who actually cared for Hermione, the fourth year Slytherin Pansy had asked to the dance at the last minute after being turned down by Draco had no attachment at all to the pug-nosed girl. In fact, at the moment his gaze was firmly attached to Lavender Brown's rear as she walked by.

Seeing this, and sensing her odds at any further verbal sparring weren't getting any better, Pansy grabbed him by the sleeve. "Come Dexter, let's leave these creeps and go find some real wizards and witches to converse with." It was a parting blow of sorts, but lacked conviction.

"Nice comeback, Terry," Harry admitted with a whole new respect for the Ravenclaw. Anyone who defended his friends like that deserved praise, at the least. For all the trouble Pansy had given Hermione over the years, Harry felt more like handing over a fistful of galleons.

"Hopefully now she'll leave us alone for the rest of the night, and we can enjoy ourselves."

And enjoy themselves they did. For the next hour, Harry, his date, and his friends partook of all the excellent food and company the night had to offer. Harry even managed a few clumsy dances with Ginny, and one with Hermione, now that he was older and less embarrassed. A Fred Astaire he wasn't; not even close. But by not having to lead the very first dance, and not having every single eye in the house on him, Harry managed to sway back and forth to some of the slower songs without too much trouble.

Neville and Cami seemed to be hitting it off as well, as far as first dates went. Not that they were all over each other, but there were no awkward silences and Harry didn't have to rescue either of them with small talk as he feared he might. Terry fit in with the group easily enough, and ever so politely engaged everyone at the table for at least a few minutes conversation. He sat right next to Luna, with her date right besides her. How Luna managed to not only know Orion Flint, but know him well enough to ask him to the dance, was a large

topic of conversation. His sister Cassie and her date, and Susan Bones with Wayne Hopkins filled out the remaining seats.

It was another hour later, about halfway through the dance, that Harry was shocked to see Ron, the one most missing from the night's events, approach him from the Great Hall doors. Unlike everyone else in the Room, Ron wasn't wearing dress robes. In fact, he wasn't even regular robes. Dressed in a simple pair of muggle jeans and a shirt, everyone had noticed his approach. All throughout the dance, even as far up as the staff table, hushed tones of conversation erupted.

"Er, Ron," Harry struggled briefly, "what's up?" Harry had hoped Ron would come to the dance, even if he came stag. But frankly, Harry hoped Ron might show at the beginning of the dance. To either show up like nothing had happened, or to not show up at all, were both expected behaviors from the youngest Weasley son. Drawing notice to himself by arriving at an odd time out of formal dress was so unlike his friend, Harry was immediately put on alert.

"Harry," Ron nodded to him in greeting. "I was wondering if I could have a private word with you?" Looking directly at Hermione, he added, "You too Hermione, if you please."

Perhaps shocked at his politeness, Hermione fidgeted with her napkin for the briefest of moments before pushing her chair back and standing. Taking Hermione's lead, Harry made to follow. The quick squeeze Ginny gave his hand meant a lot. Once standing, the three once-best-friends made their way over to a quiet corner, where they found a smidgeon of privacy.

"Ron..." Hermione started, but was cut off when the red head raised his hand in protest.

"Please, Hermione, let me say my piece." Waiting for her nod of consent, Ron took a deep breath and spoke.

"A few hours ago, I had planned on not showing to this dance at all. I was going to ignore it, and all our problems, and come Monday morning, would have continued on like normal. But with all the first

and second years running around, I had to get out of the common room, and that forced me up to the dorms. The last time I'd been in there alone was the night we had our last talk Harry, and it got me thinking.

"You were right. Are right." He shrugged. "Whatever. Both you and Hermione have matured more than me, and me not realizing it has been causing problems. Most of them my fault, I know. I'm still not pleased that the whole family knew about the gold you gave us before me, but I've gotten past it. And I know I acted foolish when I found out about you and Terry," he said to Hermione, "but I was hurt I didn't hear it from you sooner. But I'm not here to place blame or win back face. I just wanted to apologize before things got worse. I know it's not the best time, but I was going stir crazy in my room all alone, and I couldn't wait any longer.

"Harry, I'm sorry I've been so touchy and jealous in the past, this year especially. I know it's a problem I have, and I know you don't purposely rub my face in anything, or flaunt yourself. I can't promise to get over it overnight. But I've done some hard thinking this week since we talked, and I'm going to try much harder to talk to you if I get upset, and not loose my temper so much. If it's alright with you, I'd like us to try and be best mates again. I know you've got a lot on your plate this year, and we can't spend all our time together like we used to. But I miss how things used to be, and honestly," he added with a goofy grin, "I have no bloody clue what the hell football is about, no matter how many times Dean tries to explain it."

Harry just smiled in relief, and nodded. He too missed his close friendship with Ron, in the few hours he wasn't consumed with homework, training, and Quidditch. If he could have done anything to patch things up, he would have a long time ago. But what with Ron being Ron, Harry knew he had to come around on his own, and it was about damn time.

"Ron, you had me at hello."

Hermione laughed off to the side, and Harry noticed she was chocked up with tears at her two friends' reconciliation. Ron, on the other hand, who had never been to a muggle film, let alone had a working pop

culture knowledge of them, was more than confused. The look on his face said it all.

"It means he forgives you, Ron," Hermione explained for him, elbowing Harry in the ribs for the joke.

"Oh," Ron's relief was palpable. "In that case, Hermione, I owe you an..."

She cut him off with a hug that was almost a tackle. "I forgive you too, you great big prat!"

Again, things weren't perfect, but they were well on their way to getting there.

Ron came by the table to say hi to the others, but it was clear he was uncomfortable at the dance now that he had done what he came to do. No matter how much the others tried to get him to stay the remainder of the night, he was adamant about returning to his room and leaving the others to enjoy their dates. He was even man enough to say a few words to Terry, something akin to "you're a lucky man...treat Hermione right."

Ron did make a quick trip to the buffet table, where he had a few unpleasant words with Malfoy about his wardrobe, but that was quickly averted by the women. Hermione was high as a kite after Ron's apologies, and not even Malfoy could have ruined her mood that night. Malfoy's date, Morag McDougal, also dragged him away by the arm, before things could come to blows. She did level a sneer at Harry though, which he thought was strange. He'd never been on speaking terms with the Ravenclaw, but he'd never been at odds with her either. Harry didn't get more of a chance to think about it though, because not a moment later, loud explosions from outside shook the crystal chandeliers. It didn't take long for the band to stop playing, and the room's eyes turned to Dumbledore in his grandiose chair for an explanation.

Once the music stopped, the explosions were much louder and more defined, and some of the students started to panic.

“Students,” Dumbledore spoke up, his quiet voice caring over the large room with all the authority of a muggle megaphone, “please calmly remain in the Great Hall while the staff inquires to this fracas.” Fracas? Harry had to give the headmaster credit for not only remaining so calm, but for his choice of vocabulary as well. He could always put his unique spin on any situation.

“While unfortunate, this disturbance is not wholly unexpected or unprepared for. Depending on what we discover, we may have to cut the evening off short. But for right now, be comforted to know all the younger students are safe in their common rooms, and do try to enjoy the remainder of the dance. Professors Snape and McGonagall, please join me in the Entry Hall directly.”

With that, Dumbledore and the two others quickly left the room. Sprout signaled the band to start playing again, even over the loud noises, although none of the students were in the mood to dance. Still, once the dance resumed, most of the students took to the floor regardless. Not to dance, but to gossip.

“What do you think is happening?”

“Do you think there’s an attack?”

“I bet one of the younger students is setting off fireworks in the castle.”

Harry and his friends kept silent, but listened to the rumors as they spread and intensified. Within five minutes, the current belief was that Voldemort was knocking on the doors of Hogwarts himself, and Harry feared they were more right than they knew.

Sensing something was about to happen, regardless of how he thought he had foiled Voldemort’s plans for the night, he gathered his friends close by and drew his wand. By that simple action, they knew something was up, and immediately quieted.

“Harry?” Ginny asked, and that was all anyone needed to say.

"It's Voldemort." Harry said, for the first time realizing the slight pain in his scar he'd felt all day was more noticeable than it'd been before. "I think he's here. If he is, I'm sure Dumbledore can handle him, and at least keep him out of the castle. But I want everyone to be on their guard, just in case. It isn't like Voldemort to try something so bold alone.

Indeed, it was very unlike him. For Voldemort never attacked without backup. Unbeknownst to Harry and his friends, there were already Death Eaters in the castle.

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Voldemort was angry; angrier than he'd been in many, many years. The attack on the castle only had a slight chance of working he knew, and that was only if things went according to plan. And things were definitely not going to plan. And even then, if the attack failed, there were to be no casualties on his side. Already with the missing Death Eaters, his troops were in too short supply to risk more getting captured or killed. They were merely meant to cause a distraction, and draw the staff out to the castle grounds. Imagine his disappointment when Malfoy and the fourteen others were nowhere in sight. He'd deal with them later. With plans already committed to, Voldemort had no choice but to attack alone, or abandon the Death Eaters he had sent to the castle in disguise. They were few, yes, but more talented and resourceful than he could afford to loose. So putting it mildly, Voldemort was pissed.

It was fortunate that Dumbledore then, was the one to meet him as he exited the large entry doors on the chilly February night. With his anger intensifying his spells, most of the other staff would never had stood a chance against the most feared dark wizard in decades. Even from the distance that the wards held him back, Voldemort's spells had no trouble covering the large span between the two rivals and causing visible damage to the castle's outer structure and grounds.

"Dumbledore!" Voldemort yelled, taunting his enemy, "Relying on the founder's magics to protect you from me? Why don't you come out here and fight me like you claim to be able to! The only one I ever feared, ha! That may have been true at one point, but it's been a long

time since you could threaten a mere schoolboy with detentions and house points. I'm now twice the wizard that you ever were, and you know it! So come out and face me, unless you're afraid."

'Well,' Dumbledore thought, 'that was a bit over the top.' Voldemort was clearly attempting to draw him away from the castle, but to what purpose? 'And what good would that do,' he wondered, 'if the rest of the staff remained? Flitwick and the others could surely handle any attacking Death Eaters, even if they could breach the castle's defenses. Not to mention the prefects and older students, and Harry himself. If this is Voldemort's plan, he would have been wiser to attack with a stronger force. Even I couldn't have defended from multiple positions. More staff would have had to join me, and that would have been far more effective.'

Dumbledore's thoughts mirrored Voldemort's original intentions exactly. A shame Harry Potter had to go and ruin it all.

"Tom," Dumbledore spoke calmly, not rising to the obvious bait. "I can't imagine what you're doing here, but surely it's not to challenge an old man to a duel. Speak your mind, and then leave this place. Your business with Hogwarts was concluded a long time ago."

"Don't call me that!" He screamed, continuing to fling curses. "And I will do with Hogwarts what I wish."

With so much space between the two, Dumbledore effortlessly blocked and countered every spell that approached him. The others splashed harmlessly against the castle's thick stone walls, strengthened by centuries of magical energy. Even the strongest Unforgiveables only caused pebble-sized debris to be chipped away slowly, as if by erosion.

"Any idea what he's up to, Severus?" Dumbledore asked softly to the man hidden in shadows behind him to his left. McGonagall was likewise behind him, but to his right. Her literal position mirrored what she felt her metaphoric one was.

"Headmaster," Snape admitted, confused, "I honestly have no idea. I would suspect this to be a diversion, but it seems to be ineffective. Perhaps the Dark Lord has finally lost it."

Snape said it without humor, and that's the way Dumbledore took it. He hoped his potion master was wrong. For as powerful and dangerous as Voldemort was, mentally unbalanced he'd be even worse.

"I hope not Severus," Dumbledore voiced his concerns. "Either way, I can handle this alone, as long as the wards hold, of which I have no doubt. Minerva, I'd like you to stay with me just in case his Death Eaters show. Severus, please return to the Great Hall and inform the others that unfortunately the dance must end early. With Voldemort so near, even though the children are in no immediate risk, it would do well to be cautious."

Snape bristled at the fact that McGonagall was asked to stay while he was demoted to the level of errand-boy, but nonetheless did as he was told. As he slipped from the shadows, Voldemort finally did catch a glimpse of him, and his spells increased in speed and severity beyond the abilities of anything most of magical Britain was capable of. Snape was the only man to ever turn against Voldemort and live to tell about it, and his continued existence was a festering sore in the Dark Lord's reputation.

None of that mattered though. For the longer Voldemort kept Dumbledore and his staff busy, the more time his agents inside had to accomplish their mission.

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It'd been almost twenty minutes since Dumbledore and the two heads of house had left, and during that time the loud noises and explosions outside had only subsided for moments. Still, with the expression "out of sight, out of mind" in their thoughts, most of the students attending the dance got back to actual dancing. They'd left the wild rumors and speculations behind the moment they got too extravagant to believe.

Not Harry and his small dutiful group, though. He and his friends still either all had their wands drawn or their hands hovering over them, ready for anything. Half the other students hadn't even brought their wands to the dance. Not the D.A. though. If they had learned anything, it was that disaster never struck according to plan, and one had to be prepared anywhere at any time. Constant Vigilance!

"I can't stand this not knowing!" Hermione exclaimed yet again, for what was the once too many time.

Terry rubbed her back as Ron rolled his eyes at his friend's theatrics. That didn't stop he and Harry from scanning the crowd though, looking for possible trouble. Some of the other students remained disturbed and on high alert, and a suspicious number of them Slytherins it seemed. As long as more people remained on alert, Harry didn't care who they were. But his attention left the door in that small instant, and before he realized what was happening, the warning signal on his watch acted up. The warning signal that warned him of nearby Death Eaters.

"Hey!" Harry called out to his friends, quiet enough to not garner the attention of others, but with enough strain in his voice to let them know this was serious. "There are Death Eaters in the room; at least one. Everybody draw your wands and keep on the lookout." He fingered his watch as well, turning the modest but useful shield on.

Harry was starting to get a sense of the Death Eater's direction when Neville pointed out Snape. Neville, along with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, was one of the few to know about his watch's alarm. Therefore when Snape came barreling through the doors and headed towards the staff table, he mistook him as the threat Harry's watch had identified. He wasn't the only one to make such a mistake.

"Oh, it's just Snape." The surly man passed within five feet of Harry, and his watch blazed with an indescribable and painless heat that only occurred when the Dark Mark got so close.

"He looks pretty upset," Harry noticed. "Even more than usual. I wonder what's really going on outside?"

It took a few moments for Snape to converse with Flitwick and the others, but they soon signaled the band to stop playing once again. Tiny little Flitwick used a Sonorus spell to amplify his squeaky voice, and made the unpopular announcement.

“Students! Students! May I have your attention please. Now, I don’t want to alarm anyone, but we’ll have to cancel the remainder of tonight’s activities. Please wish your dates a pleasant evening, and make your way back to your common rooms. Curfew will be enforced starting in a half hour, and any students found out of bounds will serve a week’s detention and will lose their house fifty points. No exceptions!”

For Flitwick to impose such harsh punishments, everyone knew something severe was going down. Suddenly taking the loud noises heard from outside more seriously, almost every student scrambled for the doors. If the first and second years had been allowed to attend the dance, they might have been trampled on.

It was in all the commotion that Voldemort’s agents finally got their chance. All night long, too many professors had been present to risk their assignment. Not only did they have to strike, and strike quickly, but they needed the cover of confusion to escape the castle as well, and return to their master with news of success. Now was their chance.

Their mission; kill Harry Potter!

And in the mass pandemonium of terror-stricken students, Bellatrix Lestrange approached Harry Potter with her wand in hand, and a curse on her lips, as Wormtail watched from sidelines. Harry’s back was turned, and he didn’t stand a chance.

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#### AUTHOR NOTES:

Hello Strangers! It’s been so long, I hardly know where to begin. Let me start off by apologizing. Not only for making some of you wait so long (has it really two years?!), but for also promising updates in the

past when I didn't deliver. My life has become more hectic than I thought possible in the last few years (including three moves, two changes of occupations, a good amount of time out at sea, etc.), and I never expected to take this long to update PoT. But on day one I did promise I'd finish the story...no matter how long it took...and I'm still going to hold to that if nothing else.

My story has gone through lots of changes of course in the time I've been gone. Just because I haven't been posting doesn't mean I haven't been writing. I'm actually working on an original work now, and I admit I'm saving some of my best ideas for that. It would be nice to be paid for the trouble, no? But please, don't ask about it, I'm keeping that one under wraps for now.

But now with this new chapter of PoT, I'm confident I'm back with a vengeance. I can't make any promises to my posting schedule (depends on what the Navy has planned for me,) but I do believe it will be weeks or months between updates now; not years.

That's it for now, as most people probably haven't been with the story long enough to know what I'm talking about. But welcome to you newbies, and for all my old readers, thanks for sticking around. I made a promise to you that I intend to keep. So if you'd like to re-read the story to get reacquainted with it, than I'd be flattered. More coming soon.

Ross